



DEMON SLAYER

KIMETSU NO YAIBA

ONE-WINGED
Butterfly



Novel by

AYA YAJIMA

Original Concept by

KOYOHARU GOTOUGE



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VIZ MEDIA

**SHONEN
JUMP**





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DEMON SLAYER: KIMETSU NO YAIBA—
ONE-WINGED BUTTERFLY

Novel by
AYA YAJIMA
Original Concept and Art by
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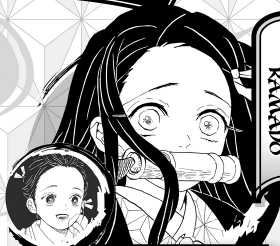
JUNIOR HIGH AND
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AFTERWORD

CHARACTERS



TANJIRO
KAMADO

A kind boy who saved his sister when the rest of his family was killed. Now he seeks revenge.



NEZUKO
KAMADO

Tanjiro's younger sister. When a demon attacked her, she was turned into one herself.



ZENITSU
AGATSUMA

He went through Final Selection at the same time as Tanjiro. He's usually cowardly, but when he falls asleep, his true power emerges.



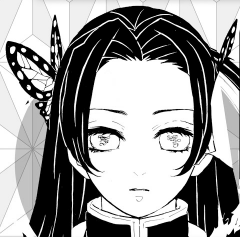
INOSUKE
HASHIBIRA

He went through Final Selection at the same time as Tanjiro. He wears the pelt of a wild boar and is very belligerent.



SHINOBU
KOCHŌ

Insect Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. Familiar with pharmacology, she is a swordswoman who has created a poison that kills demons.



KANAE
KOCHŌ

Shinobu's older sister. She fought the Upper Rank demon Doma but was defeated.



GYOMEI
HIMEJIMA

Stone Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He is always holding a rosary and reciting Buddhist prayers.



GIYU
TOMIOKA

Water Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He invited Tanjiro to join the Demon Slayer Corps and has watched over him since.



MUICHIRO
TOKITO

Mist Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He's the descendant of users of Sun Breathing—the first breathing technique.



AIOI
SAKURAJIMA

Love Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. She joined the Demon Slayer Corps to find a man to marry.



OBANAI
IGURO

Serpent Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He's a mysterious warrior who moves in tandem with snakes.



KYOJURO
RENGOKU

Flame Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He annihilates demons with Flame Breathing.



TENGEN
UZUI

Sound Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. Former shinobi who likes things to be flashy.



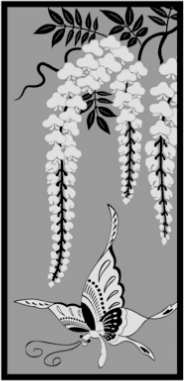
SANEMI
SHINAZUGAWA

Wind Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He has a harsh attitude toward his younger brother Genya.



GENYA
SHINAZUGAWA

He went through Final Selection at the same time as Tanjiro. His older brother is Sanemi, the Wind Hashira. He and Tanjiro met again in the village of swordsmiths.



Chapter 1
**ONE-WINGED
BUTTERFLY**

Gyomei Himejima was once a kind man.

He used to live in an old temple, taking care of orphaned children with nowhere to go. And though they were poor, they were happy. He would eat little himself so that he could feed the children instead, and he worked himself to the bone day in and day out. Not only had he never hit a person, he didn't even raise his voice to scold the children for their wrongdoings.

Sensitive and honest to a fault, he was an ordinary man, kind to the point of excess.

Until that nightmarish evening ...



“Namu Amida Butsu.”

Himejima sliced off the demon's head with his Nichirin Sword hatchet and then crushed it with the iron ball at the end of the chain leading from the hatchet's handle.

The room was already a sea of blood by the time he had arrived on the scene. Now the blood gushing from the demon mixed with that of the murdered couple to fill the air with a choking stench.

Two little girls cowered in front of the falling demon. The elder of them, though still in her early years, was desperately shielding the younger one. They had a similar look, and he guessed they were sisters. Both were shaking and crying. Their hearts were no doubt full of fear.

The grief of losing their parents would no doubt close in on them later. That would then mutate into hatred at the senselessness of having the people they loved taken from them.

But right now, the girls' hearts were ruled by stark, overwhelming terror of this unfathomable creature known as a demon.

Perhaps I too appear as a monster in their eyes.

As he had with Sayo. He had given up so much for her, been injured for her,

risked his life to protect her, and she had trembled in fear in front of everyone and sobbed.

“That man is a monster. Everyone—he killed everyone!”

The adults who came running, the officers who questioned him, and even Himejima himself didn’t know that the man Sayo had been referring to was a demon. Convinced that a terrified, confused little girl had gotten everything twisted up in her memory and called him a monster, Himejima never for a second forgot those words, nor her fearful voice.

Children are pitifully weak. And also cruel. This thought still ruled him.



“This is the house of Master Gyomei Himejima, yes?”

Himejima stared blankly at the girls before him. He thought he would never see them again after the Kakushi sent them to live with distant relatives, so he hadn’t even asked their names. Truth be told, he didn’t want to have anything more to do with children.

Not to mention, two weeks had passed since that attack. The fact that they were paying him a visit now meant that they must have come to find fault with Himejima.

“Please forgive us for being so rude as to come unannounced.” The older girl bowed neatly. “My name is Kanae Kocho. This is my little sister, Shinobu.”

He sensed the younger girl awkwardly bow her own head.

“What are you doing here?” he finally said.

“We asked the Kakushi about you. I do apologize that we were unable to give you a proper thank-you for saving us from the demon, Master Himejima. Thank you so much for rescuing me and my sister.” Her tone was gentle and its timbre sweet, but her voice was also clear and crisp. It made Himejima picture a flower blooming in snow.

“Thank you for rescuing my sister.” The little one followed suit and offered up

her own thanks. Her voice was still babyish, yet with an unyielding edge to it.

“We had the funeral for our mother and father,” the older sister continued. “Thanks to you, Master Himejima, their bodies were not too badly destroyed, so we were able to have a wake with them in coffins. We are in your debt.”

The words of both sisters were rich with sincerity. Their grief at the loss of their parents, their gratitude to Himejima, and their love for each other came through to him loud and clear.

Did you come here just to tell me that? The wounds in their hearts hadn’t even healed yet. He was moved by their bravery, but he was also afraid of getting involved with them.

While they spoke such admirable words now, with the passage of time, they might start to reproach him and ask why he hadn’t rescued them sooner. They might say their parents’ deaths were his fault. That was the sort of creature a child was. Therefore, he was deliberately curt with them.

“It’s my job to kill demons. No need for thanks.”

“Yes. The Kakushi also told us about the Demon Slayer Corps.” Kanae’s voice was suddenly tense. She looked at her younger sister who looked back at her, and he felt them nod slightly at each other.

“We’ve come today with a request—” Kanae started.

“We want you to teach us how to hunt demons,” Shinobu said, cutting her sister off. “Me and Kanae. Tell us how to cut off demon heads.”

Himejima sensed with his mind’s eye the definitive difference between the sisters in the hardness of her voice. In contrast with the deep sorrow and pained resolve inside Kanae, Shinobu was filled with a burning rage and powerful loathing. The bared blade of her rage was almost beautiful.

Poor girl ... If a demon hadn’t crossed her path, this small child would have lived a happy life, wrapped in the warm embrace of her family’s love. Now she was forced to carry this unfathomable anger and hatred. That was so despicable and pitiable that he could hardly stand it.

Still, he could not allow the feelings of this moment in time to rob these

children of their futures. Above all else, Himejima's battered heart refused to care for the girls.



When he went outside to chop wood, he found Shinobu there. He frowned. "You're still here?"

"I am. You haven't said you'll teach us to hunt demons yet," Shinobu replied angrily.

The *crack* of wood splitting followed her assertion. "I'm chopping wood," she continued. "Kanae's cleaning the house and doing the laundry. She wants to wash that kimono too, so go change later, okay?"

"I don't recall asking you to do any of that," he told her, somewhat indignant. "Go home before it gets dark."

"We don't have a home to go to," she said in a hard voice. "We lost everything. We threw away whatever was left. We don't have anything now. All I've got is my sister."

She split another log. This time, the sound wasn't as sharp. The axe Himejima used was too big for a little girl.

"Give me that." He took the tool from her.

The brief contact with her hands told him they were depressingly small. From the echo of her voice, the position he heard it coming from, and the sound of her footfalls, he imagined Shinobu was a bit smaller than other girls her age, and he was exactly right.

"You have to bring the axe down on the wood perpendicularly, like this." Himejima set a log on the stump and brought the axe down. The *crack* was especially loud.

"How would you know, gramps?" Shinobu asked. "You can't see."

"I'm not yet so old as to be called 'gramps,'" Himejima told her.

The girl considered this for a moment as she decided what she would call him.

“Okay then. Himejima.” Her voice was adorable in its solemnity. “Did a demon give you that scar on your forehead? Does it still hurt?”

“Go home,” he said, ignoring her questions. He felt unreasonably irritated and sad. “Demon slaying’s not for you girls.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “I mean, there are girl Demon Slayers, right? No point in lying. The Kakushi told us.”

He nodded. “It’s true that there are girl Demon Slayers. But they are the overwhelming minority. Most girls can’t get past the Final Selection.”

“Final Selection?” Shinobu asked. “What’s that? Is it like a test? We’ll be fine then. Me and Kanae aren’t stupid.”

“It might be hard right now, but you’ll be able to forget at some point,” Himejima told her. “Live a happy life as a normal girl. Live long enough to marry the boy you love, have children, and get wrink—”

“How could I forget?!” she shouted like the words were being ripped from her throat. Surprised by Shinobu’s cry, the birds in the surrounding trees shot up into the air as one. The branches shuddered and swayed.

“My mom and dad were killed right in front of me, okay?” she yelled. “You think I can just keep going like that never happened? There’s no way ... There’s no way! You want me to live a normal life, to be happy? Lying to myself, pretending to forget—*that’s* what you call happy?! If that’s happiness, then no thanks! That’s the same as being dead!”

“Demon slaying is not an easy road,” he replied. “Every step is a bloody one. Do you think that’s the future your parents wanted for their daughters?”

“No one knows what they wanted now!” she shouted, tears in her voice.

Himejima was at a loss for words.

“So, could you do it, Himejima? Could you live like nothing happened after the people you loved got killed? Why did you join the Demon Slayer Corps? Why’d you start killing demons?!” Shinobu snapped the questions at him, and then ran off in the opposite direction of the house.

He stood rooted to the spot, at a loss.

“Don’t worry. She’ll be back soon.”

He heard Kanae’s voice from behind him. He guessed that she had heard them talking and come out of the house in concern when the conversation turned to shouting. She bowed quietly when Himejima looked back at her.

“Please forgive my sister’s rudeness,” she said. “She knows in her head that you’re simply and honestly worried about us, but her emotions can’t keep up. She’s always been the baby, and she adored our parents.”

“A certain physique is required for Demon Slayers,” Himejima responded. “While you can train to no end to refine your skills with a sword, you can’t change the amount of muscle you’re born with. Pure strength is in proportion to the amount of muscle.”

Kanae sighed. “I know that.”

“You’re good as of now with your stature,” he continued. “But even if that girl did become a Demon Slayer, she wouldn’t be able to cut off a demon’s head.”

The girl said nothing.

“What do you think awaits a Demon Slayer who can’t cut off a demon’s head?” he pressed her.

Kanae looked down, pained. After an agonizing silence, she opened her mouth.

“Our father used to tell us to share the load if we saw someone struggling with a heavy burden, to sit down and think with a person wrestling with a difficult problem, and to bring our hearts to anyone feeling sad.”

Considering Shinobu and Kanae, he could tell that their parents had no doubt been wonderful people. Kind, hardworking, honest, they had loved their daughters from the bottoms of their hearts.

Those loving parents had been taken from the girls. They had been cruelly robbed of their family by an overwhelming force they had no hope of resisting.

“I want to save people. And demons.” Kanae’s voice was earnest and filled with an inexpressible sadness. A little girl should never have to have such a voice.

His doubt still won out over pity. Himejima didn't understand what she was trying to say. "Save ... the demons?" he asked.

"The Kakushi told us that the demons were originally people like us." Kanae paused and lifted her face. "They're sad creatures. They're people, but they eat people, and they fear the beautiful sunrise. If you defeat one demon, you can save all the people that demon would have killed in the future. You can free the demon itself from that miserable fate."

"Are you saying," he began, "you want to save the demon who killed your parents?"

He felt her nod. "Yes."

"If you truly mean that, you've lost touch with sanity," he told her, unintentionally harsh.

She wants to save the demons? They're "sad creatures"?

Himejima had never had that thought, not even in passing. He still hated the demon who had taken everything from him. His most sincere desire was to kill as many demons as he possibly could. The sensation of his fists punching and punching and punching the demon's head still lingered in his hands. He was sure it would stay with him for the rest of his life. He would keep killing demons with these hands until his own heart stopped beating.

This girl is too kind.

This kindness would be praised if she went on to live a normal life. But if she was going to go forward as a Demon Slayer, her excessive kindness would eventually be her downfall.

"You shouldn't become a Demon Slayer," he told her finally.

"I want to protect people whose happiness hasn't yet been destroyed," she insisted. "Like you did for us, like you protected Shinobu—I want to do that for someone else's loved one. I want to stop the chain of sadness."

"Even if you and your sister die as a result?" he demanded.

Kanae was momentarily at a loss for words. She might have been willing to sacrifice her own life, but her sister's was a different story.

He himself knew it was a cowardly question. However ...

“I’m prepared for that,” Kanae said in a trembling voice. “Shinobu and I made a promise. We won’t let anyone else experience what we went through.”

Himejima felt a grim stirring in his heart at the girl’s tragic determination. He was angry at how unexpectedly stubborn she was. But he was more angry at himself for being unable to simply accept her. He closed eyes that couldn’t see and turned his back to the girl. He swung the axe.

The log split, the *crack* of it echoing through the area.

As if to flee Kanae’s sober gaze at his back, Himejima chopped wood with single-minded zeal.



Just as Kanae had said she would, Shinobu returned before too long.

“I’m back,” she said, with no ill will, and pushed on Himejima the wild vegetables and mushrooms she’d collected on her way back. “For supper, I thought. I’m pretty thoughtful, huh?”

Himejima scowled as he took the mountain of foraged food. He had a bad feeling about this.

Just as he feared, the sisters did not go home that evening. Himejima wished that his Kasugai Crow would come with a mission for him, but that day of all days, the crow failed to appear.

In that area, the temperature dropped dramatically when the sun went down. Himejima threw the logs that he and Shinobu had chopped onto the fire in the sunken hearth, and the hot smell of burning wood mingled with the delicious scent of miso soup and rice.

“Himejima!” a childish voice called down to him. “We made supper.”

“Please excuse us. We went ahead and used the rice and miso paste you had in the house,” Kanae added apologetically.

He had no choice but to sit around the hearth with the sisters. The meal they

had made consisted of wild vegetables stewed in soy sauce, grilled char, miso soup with mushrooms, and onigiri rice balls. He was suddenly sentimental. How long had it been since he took a meal with other people like this?

A log on the fire popped with a dry *snap*. He brought the miso soup to his mouth. "It's good," he said, without meaning to.

"Shinobu made it," Kanae replied happily. "She's really good with her hands. We used to gather up herbs from the garden and play at being doctors, but she actually made real medicines."

"But you're better at everything else, Kanae," Shinobu interjected rather forcefully.

He could tell from the tone of her voice that she wasn't angry, but rather bashful.

"Kanae, okay?" she continued. "She's the most beautiful girl in our town. She's good at everything—playing the koto, flower arranging, tea ceremony. And everybody in town's totally head over heels for her."

"Shinobu, enough," Kanae told her.

"If you could see, Himejima," Shinobu said, ignoring her older sister, "I bet you'd be surprised."

"Come on, Shinobu!"

"But it's true, isn't it?"

"Honestly, you!" Kanae changed the subject. "Master Himejima, what kind of food do you like?"

"Fried eggs?" Shinobu asked. "Stews? Or maybe tempura? We'll make whatever you want tomorrow."

Himejima let the girls talk without saying much himself. The fire burning in the hearth was warm. And even though it was the same rice that he always ate, the onigiri the sisters had made for him had an incredibly gentle flavor. The air itself in the room felt kind and clear.

Living with other people brought this kind of warmth. He recalled the bygone days when he'd lived with children and then gently pressed the wreckage of

those happy days down into the depths of his heart.

That night, Shinobu woke up screaming over and over.

“Dad! Mom!”

“Shinobu ... it’s okay, you’re okay.”

“Noooooooooooooooooooo!”

“Shinobu, Shinobu ...”

He could tell the elder sister was desperately embracing the younger to comfort her.

“A demon! A demon’s got Mom and Dad!”

“Shinobu ... Shinobu ...”

The younger girl’s bloodcurdling screams, her pitiful sobs, and the older sister’s soft, comforting voice haunted his ears and refused to fade.



When he woke up in the morning, Shinobu had returned to her usual self and was waiting with Kanae and the breakfast they’d made.

The sisters stubbornly refused to leave, and after three days of this, Himejima admitted defeat. It was like a twisted game of house, sisters who had lost the parents they loved and a man who’d lost the children he’d devoted himself to raising. If he kept living with them, he would inevitably start to care for them. In fact, he might have already started to. Which was exactly why he was so afraid that he would be the one to rob these children of a peaceful future.

“Come with me.”

After breakfast on the morning of the fourth day since the start of this curious coexistence, he led the sisters outside and to the back of the house—to the enormous rock he used in his training. As tall as a large man, the rock must have looked like a small mountain to the young sisters.

He looked down at them. “If you can complete the task I’m about to give you,

then I will introduce you to a Trainer so that you can become members of the Demon Slayer Corps.”

“Really?” Shinobu said excitedly.

“Um, what’s a Trainer?” Kanae asked, confused.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” he replied. “A person who trains people in swordsmanship. There are a number of Trainers in various places, training people in the sword in various ways. Most of them are powerful former Demon Slayers who retired for one reason or another and now pour their hearts into raising up their successors. If you work hard under a Trainer and survive the Final Selection on Mount Fujikasane, then you will be recognized as Demon Slayers of the Demon Slayer Corps.”

“What? You’re not going to teach us, Himejima?” Shinobu’s voice held a note of dissatisfaction.

His face nearly relaxed into a smile. When she wasn’t exploding in anger or screaming at the nightmares that tortured her, she really was quite childish. The frequent changes in the tone of her voice revealed her straightforward personality, and he’d come to find this rather adorable. But he never told her that.

Himejima deliberately quashed this feeling and told her coolly, “I have my own duties. And my own training. I don’t have the time to teach anyone else.”

“But you’re so strong. You still train?” Shinobu asked dubiously.

“I understand,” Kanae cut her off. “When we are able to overcome this trial without incident, please introduce us to a Trainer.”

“You’ll be going to two different Trainers,” he said.

“What ... ?”

Their fear and confusion—particularly Shinobu’s—reached him through the air. Then the girls quickly regained their composure.

“Kanae,” Shinobu said, her voice firm with resolve.

“That’s fine.” Kanae nodded deeply. “We’ll live through the Final Selection and be together again.”

Himejima closed his eyes and put a hand on the training rock. He felt the chill, tough surface against his palm. “The training is simple. Move this rock. If you can move this rock, then I will accept you.”

He knew he was asking the impossible. It had been quite some time before he himself had been able to move the rock.

This was a diplomatic method of sending a nuisance on its way. As he expected, the older sister was speechless, while next to her Shinobu gritted her teeth.

“Are you stupid?” she demanded. “There’s no way we could do that! Who could move this thing? Come on!”

“I can walk an entire block pushing this rock,” he replied.

“Well, sure! You’re Himejima! You’re as big as a bear! But there’s no way we can!” Shinobu declared, her voice indignant.

“Do you think that would be the end of it, if you can’t?” he asked her.

“W-what ...”

“Someone dies if you can’t,” he said harshly. “Someone you need to protect gets killed. Will you still make these weak excuses when it’s life or death?”

Overwhelmed, Shinobu pursed her lips and said nothing.

“It isn’t about whether we can or cannot. There are things we *have* to do. Regardless of how strong you are, no matter what you have to sacrifice, you have to put your life on the line and do the job. Being a Demon Slayer means you bear the weight of people’s lives on your shoulders.”

The sisters were silent.

“If you can’t do that, then go home.” Himejima turned his face away from them and left without saying another word.

The orders from the Kasugai Crow came that afternoon.

When Himejima went to tell them that he would be away for a while, the girls were still in front of the rock, throwing themselves into the fruitless effort of trying to push it somehow. He told them about his mission, and Kanae quietly

bowed her head.

“Please take care,” she said. “And make sure you return safely.”

“You must light the wisteria incense at night if you’re planning to stay in the house. You absolutely must not forget,” he insisted. “Promise me that you will light the wisteria incense.”

“Thank you. We will make sure to light the incense,” Kanae promised, her voice slightly tense. “I pray for the success of your mission.”

Shinobu said nothing. She was looking at him bitterly from her sister’s side.

Feeling her presence behind him—angry, on the verge of tears—Himejima headed out on his mission.

The girls would leave before long, discouraged and indignant. Cursing his name.

And then he would never see them again. With this thought in his head, he felt a hole open up in his heart, and a cold wind blew through it. This was a hole that would take time to fill. But ...

It’s better this way ...

Having known sadness, the girls would grow into strong and kind adults. He wanted them to have children and be connected to life instead of death. He wanted them to somehow live the years ahead of them that the children who died at the old temple couldn’t.

That was all he wished for. Even if this was only him lying to his own weak self ...



When Himejima finished his mission and returned home after a lengthy absence, the house was empty, but he could sense people in the back.

This aura ... It can’t be, he thought as he went around the house to find the two girls sitting exhausted beside the rock. Kanae and Shinobu. Their breathing was ragged, like they were horribly worn out.

Himejima hurried over to them, and Shinobu lifted her face, noticing him at last.

“Oh, Himejima. Welcome home,” she said, sounding utterly spent.

Beside her, Kanae staggered to her feet and quietly bowed, the same way she had when he left on his mission. “I hope your work went well,” she said. “We’re so glad you returned safely.”

“Girls.” *Have you been here this whole time?* he started to ask, and then frowned, sensing something was off.

The position of the rock had changed. It was far from a block, but the rock had indeed moved. For all that Himejima was unable to see, he had absolute confidence in his senses. How ... ?

While he was at a loss for words, he felt the girls smiling at each other, full of satisfaction. Then Shinobu took his hand and gently set his palm on a cylindrical object that extended from beneath the rock. Himejima guessed at its purpose.

“A lever?”

“Yup.” Shinobu nodded.

They had dug out the earth beneath the rock, pushed in a stick to create a point of action, and inserted a log from nearby to create a fulcrum.

“Did the two of you come up with this?” he asked.

“I told you, didn’t I? My sister and I are smart,” Shinobu replied smugly. “But, well ... We failed a bunch of times.”

Her hand on his was covered in dirt. The blisters on her palm had burst, and the skin was thick and hard. Kanae’s hands were likely in the same state.

“What?” Shinobu said grumpily when Himejima said nothing in praise of their efforts. “You got a problem with this?”

Her tone hid the fear on the other side of her words.

“You never said once that we couldn’t use a lever or something.”

She was worried about what they would do if their promise was broken and an unfair, hardheaded grown-up scolded them.

“A promise is a promise,” he said at last.

“Mm-hmm. That is correct,” Shinobu said as a challenge.

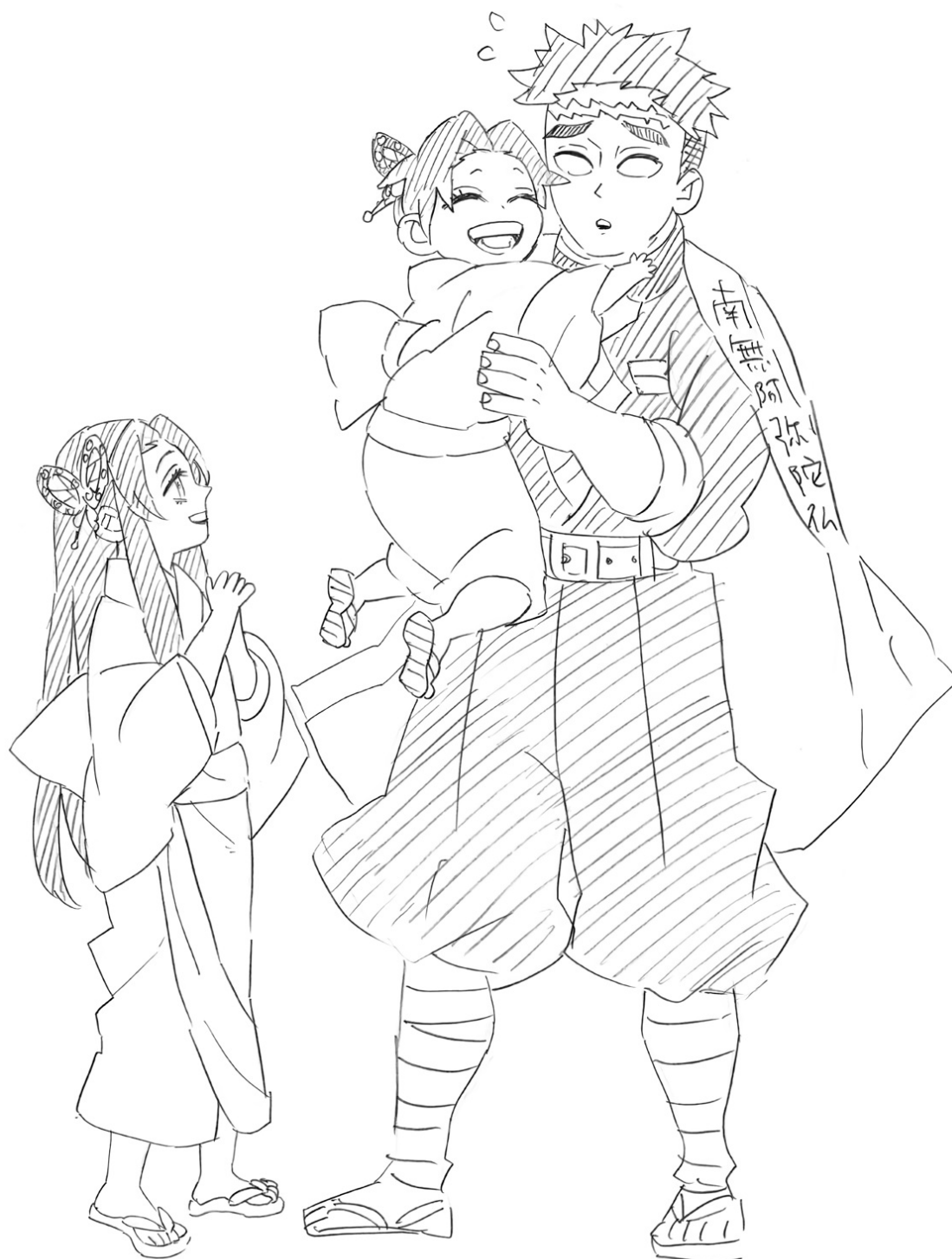
Himejima put a hand on her head, his cheeks softening into a smile. “I accept you.”

The tension finally drained from Shinobu’s small body. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“So will you introduce us to a Trainer?” she asked eagerly.

“I will not shirk my duty,” he replied. “I will introduce you to Trainers of great skill.”



After this bit of negotiation, Shinobu cried out in joy, and Kanae let out a sigh of relief. Something warm filled Himejima's heart after long years of cold.

"Kanae, Shinobu. Well done. You did it." He called them by their names for the first time.

The younger girl sniffled, while the older smiled gently.

The next morning, the sisters set out on their journeys to their respective Trainers.



"Well then, each of you determine the details of your training and make your preparations."

With that, the Hashira Meeting came to an end. As the Hashira—excluding Tomioka, who had left early—marched out of the tatami room, Shinobu came over to him.

"Himejima."

"What?" he said.

"I can't take part in the Hashira Training," she told him. "I have something urgent to attend to."

"Poison?"

"Yes." She nodded coolly. "It will likely take a bit of time."

"It will?"

Her voice was as it ever was. No tension, no enthusiasm. Not even the slightest hint of emotion. It was simply calm like the light of the spring sun, and endlessly kind.

It was almost exactly that of her late sister.

Shinobu had changed with Kanae's death. The mannerisms, tone, bearing, and personality of her excessively kindhearted sister who cared for even the demons she was to defeat—Shinobu adopted all of it. And after the kind of

training that made a person vomit blood, she had made it all the way up to the rank of Hashira. Anyone who had known Shinobu well in the past would have been unable to hide their surprise at how she was now.

You ... Would you not have been able to go on had you not changed like this? Was it that painful? Was the agony that great?

Himejima no longer knew if his decision that day had truly been the right one. The two girls had worked hard under the Trainers Himejima introduced them to, survived the Final Selection, and wept when they were at last reunited.

But a few years later, Kanae died, and Shinobu lost her beloved sister. Himejima lost them both. The little girl who had come to him that day burning with rage, hatred of demons on full display, was gone now.

Regret was the one thing Himejima could not permit himself. No. He couldn't regret his choices. Regret would have meant a denial of the way Kanae lived, true to herself to the last, dying heroically as a Demon Slayer—and of Shinobu's feelings as she tried to carry out her late sister's dying wish.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me." Shinobu dipped her head and turned her back to Himejima.

In that moment, he was overcome with an indescribable anxiety. He felt as though he would never see this girl again.

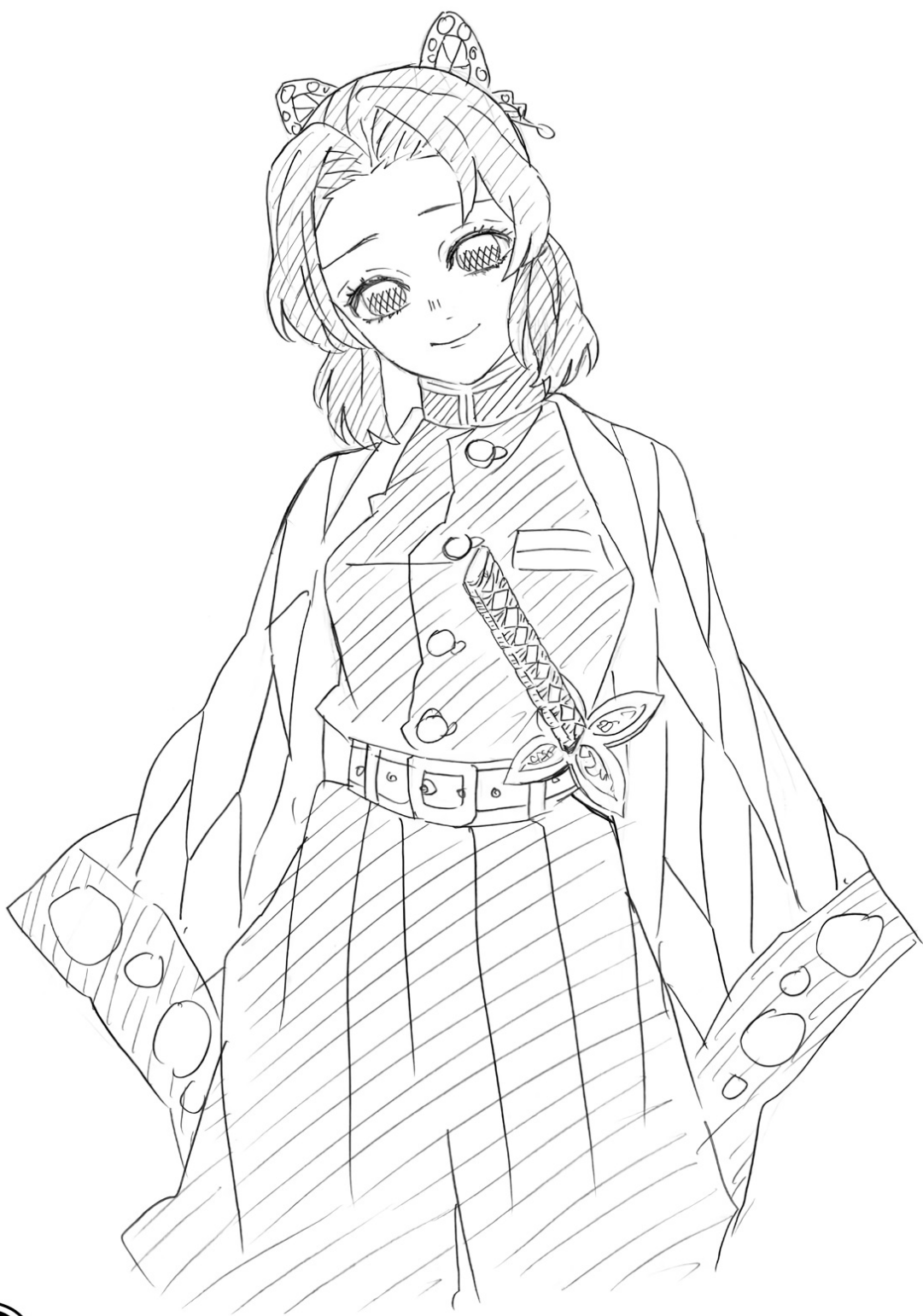
"Shinobu." Unconsciously, he called out to that small back that carried so much on it, like he had when she was little.

She stopped, the air around her the slightest bit disturbed.

For the most fleeting of moments, he could sense a little girl on the verge of tears before him. This quickly faded, replaced by her usual calm aura, and she looked back at him. "What is it?"

Don't go dying on me. He swallowed the words that were on the tip of his tongue.

The sisters really had been so close. They had loved each other from the bottom of their hearts, worked for each other, believed in each other, and each cared more for the other than either of them did for their own selves.

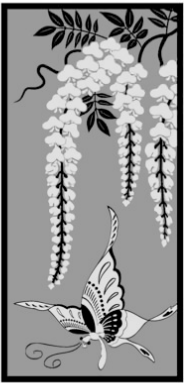


Shinobu no doubt lived now with nothing but vengeance for her sister in her heart, and there was no one in this wide world who had the right to try and stop her.

“Oh. It’s nothing,” he managed to say.

“You’re a funny one, Himejima.” Shinobu smiled, the slightest bit perplexed.

The same smile as her sister. Himejima couldn’t stop her from walking away now.



Chapter 2
**CORRECT ONSEN
RECOMMENDATION**

“Of course, I couldn’t do it as fast as you, but I’m truly thankful. That’s how connections with other people help you get out of tight spots. Everything you learn in Hashira Training will pay off for you in the future.”

With this gentle encouragement from Tanjiro, Zenitsu had finally gotten back on track and was excited about moving ahead. His newfound enthusiasm, however, didn’t last an hour into the first of the Hashira Trainings, a hellscape ruled over by the former Sound Hashira, Tengen Uzui.

“Snap to it! What? Are you asleep?!” Uzui roared. “Zenitsu! If you’ve got the time for a widdle nap, then get out there and run until you’re puking blood! You think you can beat an Upper Rank demon like this? You slack on me, and I’ll kill you!”

“Heeah. Aaaaaah!” Zenitsu shrieked. The pointed callout. The straight-up abuse. The merciless blow delivered with a wooden sword. He was ready to throw in the towel.

So, what? No special treatment at all or anything? I mean, we fought an Upper Rank demon together. You and me. We worked hard, right? Worked hard and risked our lives together, y’know?

Not only was he not getting an easy ride, he actually felt like Tengen’s awareness of his existence was causing him to single out Zenitsu for extra-harsh treatment.

Inosuke, meanwhile, took to Uzui’s grueling training like a fish to water and was racing up the mountain path.

“Yaaaaaah! Headlong rush! Headlong rush!” he shouted.

“That’s the spirit, boar!” Tengen called admiringly. “Everyone else, twenty more! Zenitsu, you’ve got thirty more!”

“Daaammiiiit!” Zenitsu’s curse echoed through the mountain.



“You took down Upper Rank Six with that guy, right?” Murata, an older

Demon Slayer who Zenitsu had met at the Butterfly Mansion, turned toward him sympathetically during a break. “Why’s he got you in his sights?”

“Yeah ... that’s my question.” Zenitsu wept tears of blood from where he lay collapsed on the ground. He kicked and flailed. “I can’t do this anymore! I haaate thiiiiiiis! I want to go home and see Nezuko already! She’s the only one who can heal my heart!”

“Huh? Y-you ... No way. You have a girlfriend, Agatsuma?” Murata and the other Demon Slayers were shaken. They stared in disbelief as Zenitsu wept and moaned.

“No way,” they said in unison.

The tension in the air melted away at once. As a group of boys equally unpopular with girls, there was an unprecedented feeling of solidarity among them.

“Yeah. No way. Absolutely no way.”

“He’s just trying to distract his lonely heart with a fantasy.”

“I get that.”

“I’ve got a fantasy girlfriend too.”

“For real? You too?”

“With a face like Lady Kocho.”

“I’m all about the Love Hashira.”

“I ... I like the Tsuguko at Butterfly Mansion kind of a lot.”

As the others chatted excitedly about their own nonexistent love lives, Zenitsu automatically sat up.

“Oh, but Nezuko really exists, okay?” he told them. “She’s actually waiting for me at the Butterfly Mansion, okay? Don’t go saying she’s imaginary! It’ll make her sad!”

“It’s okay, Agatsuma,” one of the boys reassured him.

“You don’t have to make up stories,” another said.

“You want some of this?” A third offered a snack.

“Cheer up,” one told him.

“No, no, no!” Zenitsu shook his head vigorously. “I just know the next time I see Nezuko, she’s gonna be all ‘Welcome back, Zenitsu,’ saying my name in her sweet voice! And then I’m gonna marry her and feed her sushi and unagi every single day and buy her tons of beautiful kimono, and we’ll live happily ever after!”

“Uh-huh, yeah.”

“Totally, Agatsuma.”

“Unagi’s so good, huh?”

“We’ve always got your back, you know?”

“You can do it!”

The older Demon Slayers gave Zenitsu further encouragement, their eyes warm and kind.

“Hey, human garbage! Break’s over,” Uzui said as he walked over, brandishing a wooden sword.

He had such an intimidating air that it was hard to believe this was a man who had retired as a Hashira because he’d reached his limit physically. In fact, he was so full of life, Zenitsu had a hard time understanding why he had retired at all. He could only assume that the man loved tormenting the younger Demon Slayers.

“All of you, up and down the mountain until you drop on your feet,” he snapped. “And you, Zenitsu. Special training for you.”

“What ... ?”

The blood drained from Zenitsu’s face as he looked to Murata and the others for help. The Demon Slayers who had only moments before told him they would always have his back now turned their backs on him and scampered off like frightened rabbits.



“Dig up a hot spring,” Uzui ordered him.

“Huh?”

This was definitely not the terrifying and impossible imagined task that had made Zenitsu tremble in dread. Things were going in a very different direction than he’d expected.

“What?” he asked. “I’m sorry. I must have misheard you just now.”

“Go find a hot spring. No supper until you do.” Uzui tossed Zenitsu a shovel. “Here!”

Zenitsu caught it and said reflexively, “Oh, thank you.” The well-used shovel was quite heavy, and he stared at it for a minute or two.

“Whaaaaaa?!”

At last, his eyes flew open in surprise.

“Aaaaaaaaaah?!” he cried again. “What did you just say? Is your head screwed on straight? I mean, can you even just dig up a hot spring like that? Is that how that works? It doesn’t, does it? Oh, is this harassment? This is harassment then? If that’s what you’re into, I’ll be on my way. Thanks for everything!”

Zenitsu whirled around to turn his back on the former Hashira. He assumed, naturally, that Uzui would explode in rage.

His actual response was quite indifferent. “Oh, yeah?”

Not only that, but no curses came flying at Zenitsu, nor did the wooden sword split Zenitsu’s head in half.

Oh no ... What is this? It’s not what I imagined. It’s scary? Zenitsu timidly looked back, this lack of a reaction stoking his anxiety.

Uzui had his lone eye narrowed meaningfully. With just the one eye, he was even more manly—disgustingly so. “Too bad, that. If you did manage to dig up a hot spring, I was planning on making it mixed bathing.”

“M-m-m-m-m-mixed bathing?!” Zenitsu’s reaction was over the top. “M-m-m-mixed bathing, y-you mean? That? The one where ... men and women in the same tub ... Th-the dream—”

“Uh-huh,” Uzui said evenly.

“Mixed bathing ... Mixed bathing with girls.” Zenitsu shuddered with emotion before coming back to himself, high spirits abruptly dampened. “Oh, really? Is that it then? You almost fooled me again. You can talk mixed bathing all you want, but the only people at this Hashira Training are a bunch of filthy boys. Nothing fun at all about being in a bath surrounded by those jerks.” He started to walk away again.

“Hinatsuru.”

The name stopped him in his tracks.

“Wha?!”

“Makio.”

“Ngh!”

“Suma.”

“Uh ...”

Uzui slowly listed the names of his three wives. And then he laughed meaningfully. “They’re here too, you know. You’ve eaten the food they make.”

Hinatsuru, Makio, Suma ...

While the faces of the female ninja were of course exquisitely beautiful, their bewitching proportions did not pale in comparison. Slender and tall, and when it was time to shine, they stepped out.

“They love a good hot spring,” Uzui commented casually.

Zenitsu gulped. Desperately trying to hide how shaken he was, he adopted an even sulkier attitude. “Y-you mean they’ll be all ninja-like and get in wearing clothes or something? That’s the punchline? Yeah, yeah. I get it. The kind of stuff you’d think up. I’ve got your number right here.”

However ...

“Huh? Why would they wear clothes in the hot spring? Ninja, whoever, you go in the buff. Naked.”

“Ngh!!” In that moment, Zenitsu’s firm resolve crumbled. He got close enough to Uzui to practically take him in his arms. “Uzui! No, Master Uzuiii!! Lord Tengen!”

“Get off of me!” Uzui pushed him back. “So? You gonna do it or not?”

“Of course, I’d be delighted to take on this challenge!” Zenitsu shouted, eyes bloodshot and breathing ragged. If Uzui had ordered him to call him God, he would have called him God.

Mixed bathing with Hinatsuru, Makio, and Suma ... Wee hee hee! Zenitsu clutched the handle of the shovel and grinned beatifically as he pictured a heretofore undiscovered paradise on earth. The look on his face was lewd, leering, absolutely the kind of thing that would make him unpopular with the ladies.



“Okay! Tanjiro! I’ll listen, so you put that nose to work and sniff out a hot spring. Oh, wait. Tanjiro’s not here!”

Zenitsu waited until Uzui was out of sight before calling Tanjiro energetically to his side. Unfortunately, Tanjiro was not there. He finally remembered the absence of his friend.

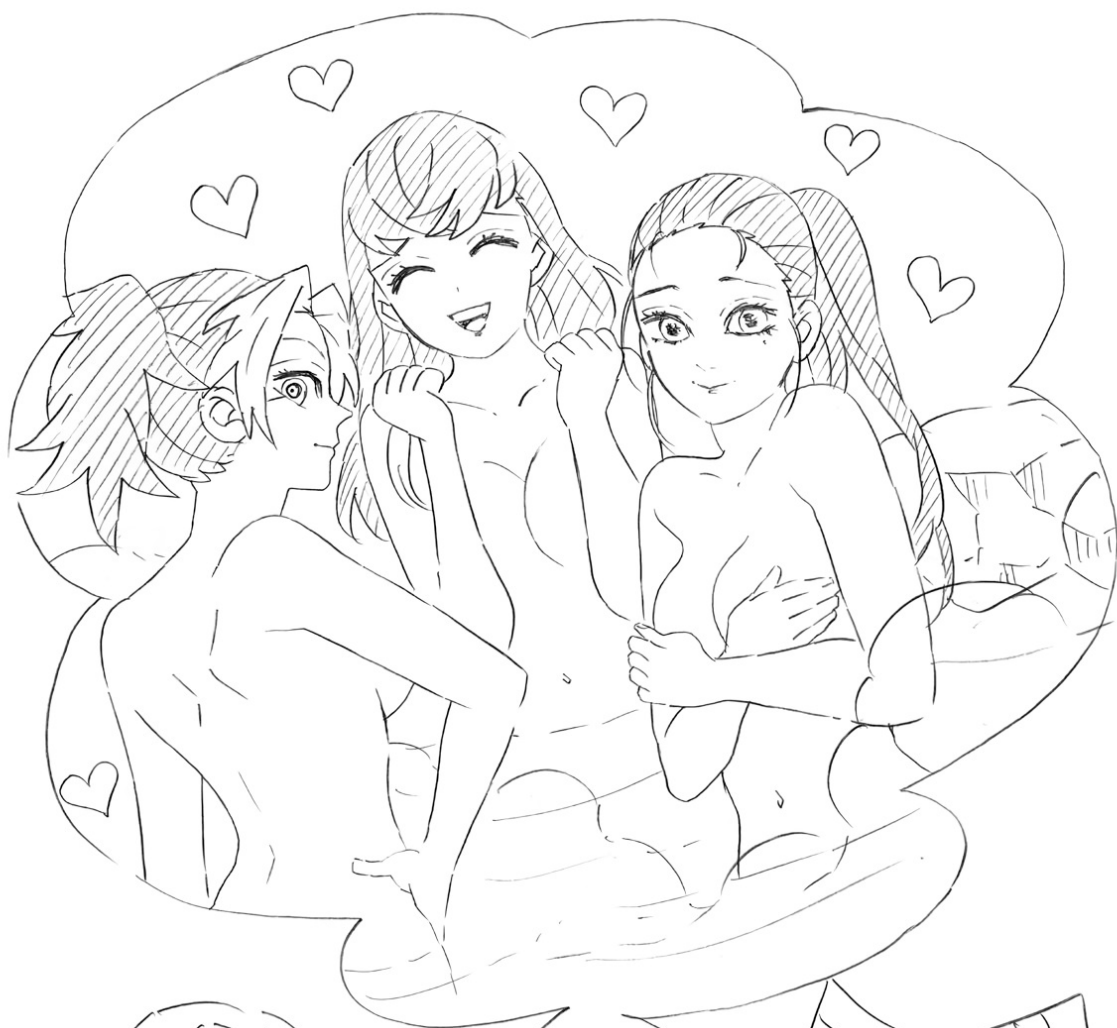
That friend had broken bones throughout his body in the fight with the Upper Rank Four demon and was still on bed rest. With the spirit of an eldest son and a kind disposition, he had saved Zenitsu countless times before. As a result, Zenitsu had come to rely on Tanjiro as naturally as he took a breath. The fact that he wasn’t there meant ...

“This is bad. I need someone else,” Zenitsu muttered under his breath.

Even if he could hunt down a hot spring beneath the earth, he’d need help to actually dig it out.

Gotta be someone strong. After all, I don’t know if I’ll get lucky on the first hit.

Someone with a special sense like Tanjiro or himself would be even better. As he considered the problem, the bushes nearby rustled, and something large jumped out.



“Ngaaaaah!!” Zenitsu shrieked. “Aaah?!”

“Headlong rush! Headlong rush!”

What he had assumed was an animal was in fact Inosuke. Perhaps simply running up and down the mountain wasn’t enough for him; he had an enormous rock on an apparently handmade carrying rack on his back.

“Oh, it’s you, Inosuke.” Zenitsu let out a sigh of relief. “Don’t scare me like that. You doing the up-and-down-the-mountain thing too? Carrying that stupid huge rock? And like, hey. Didn’t he tell you you could go to the next Hashira?”

“Yeah.” Inosuke nodded. “This morning.”

“So go already. What are you doing here?”

“I gotta strike fear into the heart of the God of Festivals first. I just gotta.” Inosuke clenched his hand into a fist. “I wanna get at least one hit in.”

This guy still thinks Uzui’s the god of festivals ...

Zenitsu wilted. He was entirely fed up with how Inosuke was so raring to go that he was doing even more training all on his own, despite the fact that he’d gotten the seal of approval to move on.

Tanjiro had this optimistic streak too, but Inosuke was almost relentlessly positive. It wasn’t that Zenitsu himself was particularly backward-looking. These two were just so shockingly forward-looking.

“You really are weird. Off your rocker.”

“So?” Inosuke looked at him. “What’re you doing? Skipping out?”

“I am not skipping out.” Zenitsu let out a sigh. “It’s special training! Uzui told me to go and dig up a hot spring, okay?”

“Haht spring?” Inosuke asked curiously. The way he pronounced it was weird.

“Not ‘haht’ spring. Hot spring,” Zenitsu corrected.

“What’s a haht spring?” Inosuke ignored him. “And dig up, you mean like bamboo shoots? Is this haht spring delicious?”

“What?” Zenitsu stared at him in disbelief. “You don’t know what a hot spring

is? It's a *hot* spring, though."

Inosuke shrugged. "Never had it before."

"You say things like 'strike fear into the heart' and know all these old songs with lyrics in weird old words, but you don't know what a hot spring is. You really are a weird guy, huh? Such a mystery. Everything about you is a mystery. I don't get it at all."

"Quit whining and let me eat it already!" Inosuke snarled. "Stupid Donitsu."

"It's not a food, and I'm not Donitsu. A hot spring is this hot bath that springs up from the ground. It's hot and feels great, and mixed—the true joy of mixed bathing, the dream of mixed bathing—in a large bathtub kind of thing."

"Mixed batter?" Inosuke frowned. "Why would batter be in the bath? Are you okay in the head?"

"You of all people do not get to ask me that! It's not mixed batter, it's mixed ba—" Zenitsu started and then stopped with a gasp.

"Ba?" Inosuke parroted.

Zenitsu stared wordlessly at the boy wearing the boar head. He was right here. A person—or rather a boar—with Tanjiro's strength, the same sharp senses. It was very much not what he'd been thinking, but there was no one more suited to the job.

There was only one catch. Friendly as he was, Tanjiro would have gladly helped out if Zenitsu asked. But asking wouldn't work with Inosuke. This guy basically did not listen to other people. He was almost shockingly unobservant. Just asking nicely was not going to cut it.

"Ba ... what?" Inosuke asked, puzzled.

"Hey, Inosuke." Zenitsu racked his brain desperately for a moment and then put his thoughts into words. "Don't you want to get stronger?"

"Uh, yeah?" Inosuke looked at him like he had two heads. "Why're you even saying something so obvious? Everybody wants to get stronger. Don't lump me in with a wimp like you."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm." Normally, this would have set Zenitsu off, but he only

hummed his agreement with a straight face. “You should get in a hot spring right away.”

“Huh?” Inosuke cocked his boar head to one side. “Why would I get stronger in the bath? Seriously, have you completely lost it finally?”

“Don’t you know, Inosuke?” Zenitsu continued. “Hot springs all have different effects. The one hiding on this mountain has a lot of ingredients that make you stronger if you bathe in it.”

“Ingredients that ... make you stronger?” Inosuke gulped hard. Zenitsu could practically see his interest in hot springs spiking. “Something like that exists?”

“Yeah, it does.”

“If I get in this haht spring, will I get stronger than that God of Festivals?”

“Yup! The old guy won’t even stand a chance.”

“And that Half-Half Sleeves too?” Inosuke demanded.

“Half-Half Sleeves? I don’t know who that is, but I’m sure you’ll be able to take out Half-Half Sleeves too. Which is why we gotta dig together right now. Dig out our mixed-bathing—I mean, dream hot spring!” Zenitsu urged Inosuke loudly, his eyes shining.

Inosuke was silent. For a second, Zenitsu was worried his pitch sounded too forced.

“We’re gonna dig and dig and dig some more! Chuitsu! Follow Lord Inosuke!!” Inosuke’s enthusiastic cry echoed through the evening mountain.



Even with Inosuke’s “instinct” and Zenitsu’s “hearing,” finding a hot spring was no easy task.

The mountain where Uzuī’s training took place was surprisingly large and precipitous. On top of that, even when they did find a potential spot, they had to dig down pretty deep to hit the source. And then, when they got down that deep and had it end in failure, they were soon very discouraged.

“What the heck!? There’s nothing here!”

“I know, I know. But I mean, it’s my first time digging a hot spring too, okay?”

“Graaaaaaar!”

“Don’t have a tantrum. I mean, I get how you feel, but ...”

How many times had they dug into the ground in vain? The mountain was fading to red in the evening sun, night upon them before they even knew it, and Zenitsu was at last honestly dejected.

“Heeey! Agatsumaaaaa! Where are youuuuu?”

“Hm? That’s Murata’s voice.” Zenitsu stood up at this familiar sound. He waved both his hands wildly in the dark in the direction the voice had come from. Murata and two other boys came running toward him carrying a large bundle wrapped in cloth, waving their own hands in turn.

“Sorry about before.”

“The former Sound Hashira’s scary.”

“Look! We snuck you some food. Eat. It’ll make you feel better.”

“Murata.” Zenitsu sniffled. “Guys.”

Inside the bundle were ten large onigiri rice balls.

“We’ve got cold water too.”

“Sob.” Handed a bamboo container, Zenitsu broke down in tears, overwhelmed by emotion.

Earlier he had been thinking things like, *“They go and say that, and then run off. Those heartless jerks. You can all go to hell,”* but they were good people at heart, after all.

Gratitude filling his heart, he brought the onigiri to his mouth. They were clumsily made and fairly salty, but they were perfect for his exhausted body. Inosuke was shoving two at once into his face.

“Aaah, onigiri’s so goood.” Zenitsu was also glad for the large amount of pickled daikon and rice grasshoppers stewed in soy sauce that accompanied the rice balls. “But how’d you manage to sneak all this away?”

“Oh. We asked Suma. She’s the easiest one to ask.”

Suma was a woman with a warm aura, slightly clumsy in a cute way.

“Go on, eat. Eat and cheer up. I dunno what he’s got you working on, but you can’t do anything on an empty stomach.”

“Thank you so much,” Zenitsu said again.

“Forget it.”

“We’re friends and all.”

“We’re not gonna let that former Hashira with his hot wives beat us. No way.”

Zenitsu talked for a while longer with his thoughtful comrades, and then they left. Even after they were gone, he stared silently into the dark for a while. And then, once he finished his first onigiri, he reached out for the last one.

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The sound of the earth shaking came from Inosuke, despite the fact that he had already polished off eight of the rice balls.

Zenitsu’s hand stopped automatically. “You’re still hungry after eating all that?” he asked, exasperated. “Then go ahead and eat this one too. My heart is so full of mixed ba—the hot spring, I’m not too hungry.” He showed an uncharacteristic generosity.

Inosuke reacted oddly. “What’re you on about? That wasn’t me.”

“Huh? Then what was—” Zenitsu cocked his head to one side.

Grugrugrugrugrugrugrugrurrrrrrrr ...

This time, he heard it quite clearly from behind Inosuke.

“No ... way ... Is that ... ?” Zenitsu squinted nervously and saw an enormous bear standing in the dark trees. The bear, with an old scar running across one eye, was twice the size of a normal bear. Waterfalls of saliva poured from the sides of its mouth.

“Eeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaah!”

“Simmer down! A bear like this, Lord Inosuke’ll make short work of it!”

His friend's confident words did not reach Zenitsu through his own tumult.

"I-I-I-I-I-I taste bad! I'm sure I taste terrible! !! Seriously! Inosuke, too! He's all muscles, nothing tasty there! Eeeaaaaah!" Zenitsu practically ran vertically up the trunk of a nearby tree.

"Hanitsu! That tree's—" Inosuke called out as he grappled with the massive bear.

"Huh? W-what? What?!" Coming back to his senses, Zenitsu panicked for an instant, and then his field of view shuddered.

"It's rotten inside," the boar head replied.

"Maybe say that sooner?! I mean, come oooooon!" Weeping, Zenitsu fell along with the tree.

"Ow ow ow!" Pressing a hand to his shoulder, he stood up.

Bwwwwmmm ...

Now he heard a somehow unpleasant sound. Clearly the sound of wings, of a certain insect. Ever so timidly, Zenitsu looked in the direction of the buzzing.

There was an enormous wasp's nest in the trunk of the fallen tree, with several thousand furious giant hornets emerging from it.

"Gah! Gah! Gaaaaaaaah!" Zenitsu shrieked.

"Once I take care of this bear, I'll help with those," Inosuke said reassuringly. "So just knock 'em out of the air one by one!"

"Are you insane?! Those are giant hornets! They can kill you! You'll die, you know?!"

"The males don't have poison stingers. Take out the females first. Although, I mean, there are basically no males."

"I'm supposed to know which is which?! How am I supposed to know that?!" Zenitsu shrieked this as all strength left his body. He grabbed Inosuke's arm just as he knocked the bear flying, and departed the scene as fast as his legs could carry him.



“Huff huff huff huff.”

Zenitsu crouched on the ground, shoulders heaving as he panted for breath after racing around the mountains to escape the furious pursuit of both bear and wasps until he no longer knew where he was or how long he had been running.

“Aah, honestly. Aah, I thought we were dead. I seriously thought we were dead. It’s so good to be alive. Thank you, Nezuko. You saved me, thank you.”

“Why’d you drag me away?!” Inosuke exploded at him. The act of fleeing from an enemy had wounded his pride. Furious, he looked as though he would cut Zenitsu down at any second. “I could’ve taken out the bear and the wasps! You didn’t have to do that!”

“Oh, is that right?” Zenitsu snapped. “Actually, maybe you could have stopped them. You’re the king of the mountain and all. But those were giant hornets, and I was the one who brought down the tree, and I didn’t want you getting hurt or dying because of me, all right?”

Inosuke sniffed in sulky silence.

“So I took you and ran. Yeah, yeah, it’s all my fault. I’m sorry, okay? Totally thoughtless of me,” Zenitsu said carelessly, and for some reason, Inosuke stopped yelling at him.

Soon, however, he got angry in a new, incomprehensible way. “Don’t make me all warm and fluffy! You dodo! You, Sojiro, the both of you go and make me all warm and fluffy every chance you get! Next time you do it, I’ll kill you!”

“Huh?” The strange thing was that the sound Zenitsu heard from Inosuke indicated Inosuke was definitely not honestly angry. This bewildering sound was unstable, strangely childish, and yet impossibly stubborn.

What even is this? This guy drives me up the wall. Zenitsu slumped over. If only Tanjiro were there, he would have been able to soothe Inosuke. He was just so tired. He flopped down on his back. He could see so many stars in the

gaps between the trees.

How was Tanjiro doing? Had he gotten a bit better at least?

He fought hard enough to break bones when he was supposed to be on bed rest. That guy's really amazing.

If they managed to dig out a hot spring, would it help heal Tanjiro's injuries? If it would, Zenitsu wanted to get him into it. As his mind drifted, he heard a faint sound, like the trickle of water.

Zenitsu yanked himself up and focused his entire being in his ears.

He was not wrong.

Something was sleeping underground only a few steps away.

This is ...

Zenitsu looked at Inosuke, who met his eyes and nodded affably.

"You noticed it, Monitsu?"

"I-Inosuke ... it can't be ..." Zenitsu's voice was full of hope.

"I got it before you did." Inosuke threw his head back smugly.



"Huh. Well, look at you two. You actually did it." Uzui praised the two mud-covered Demon Slayers in uncharacteristically high spirits as he stood before the hot spring burbling up from the ground.

Although it was fairly shallow for a hot spring, Zenitsu and Inosuke had still dug fairly deep and now looked like filthy rats. The sky to the east had already begun to pale.

"Nice work."

"Wow! This is pretty impressive. I mean, actually finding a hot spring underground!"

"I can't remember the last time I was at a hot spring."

“Oooh! Lord Tengen, let’s all of us get in together, okay? Okay?!” Uzui’s three wives, Makio, Hinatsuru, and Suma, cried out excitedly. It seemed that they really did love hot springs, and they appeared to be on the verge of stripping and jumping into the water any second now.

Finally ... At last, mixed bathing with three gorgeous kunoichi ...

Zenitsu’s heart pounded faster. If he let down his guard at all, his nose was likely to start spurting blood in his excitement.

“I’m getting in first!” Inosuke announced to the assembled party. “I’m gonna get strong and take you down, God of Festivals!” He struck a strange pose and snapped a finger out at Uzui.

“Uh, strong? What’re *you* on about?” Uzui looked at the boar boy dubiously. “You all right in the head?”

“What are you on about? Getting in a hot spring makes you stronger.”

“Whut?”

At this exchange between Uzui and Inosuke, Zenitsu floated down from his cloud of “mixed bathing, mixed bathing,” and all the color drained from his face. He had completely forgotten that he’d tricked Inosuke into helping him by telling him that he could get stronger in the hot spring.

“H-how about we set that aside for the moment? We have this hot spring at last, why don’t we—” He tried to intervene and cut the conversation short, but Uzui released the killing blow.

“You can’t get stronger from a hot spring. Did your tiny brain explode or something?”

Aaah! He actually said it! He totally said it loud and clear, this old dude! Read the room!

Zenitsu cradled his head in his hands. As for Inosuke, he froze silently on the spot.

“I ... I-Inosuke?” Zenitsu timidly said to his friend, and the boar’s eyes shone with a hard light. “Eeeee!”

“You ...” Inosuke’s voice was filled with unprecedented anger. “You went and

lied to Lord Inosuke.”

“Eep! N-no!” Zenitsu winced.

“If you did, I’ll kill you right here and now.”

“I didn’t! Inosuke! This isn’t deeper than—” Completely white now, Zenitsu took a step back, a cold sweat pouring down his face. His feet slipped.

“Hey, Zenitsu. That moss under your feet’s wet from the onsen. You gotta be careful.”

Uzui’s voice sounded terribly far away. The world spun around. As he fell backward, Zenitsu had the bad luck to hit his head on a rock and black out.



“This is a hot spring? Feels a whole lot better than a bath.”

Sitting in the water up to his shoulders, Inosuke seemed to have completely forgotten about being angry at Zenitsu and was thoroughly enjoying the hot spring.

“You’ll turn into a prune if you stay in too long,” Uzui warned, having gotten out earlier.

“Shut up! You don’t get to tell Lord Inosuke what to do!” Inosuke began to splash around the hot spring.

“This jerk.” Uzui clicked his tongue, but to Hinatsuru, her husband didn’t look particularly angry. “Hey, Hinatsuru. How’s that jerk there doing?”

“He hasn’t woken up yet,” she replied. “He did hit his head, after all. We’ll have to keep an eye on him.”

Set off to one side, Zenitsu was still unconscious. His occasional moan of “mixed bathing” elicited pity.

“What about Makio and Suma?”

“They went back to make breakfast for everyone. They were talking about getting in the hot spring again tonight. Lord Tengen, you should ...” Hinatsuru

urged him vaguely.

“Yeah.” Uzui nodded and turned his gaze back toward Inosuke having a personal party in the hot spring. “I’m going back to train those dodos, but boar, you head out to the next training ground. And when you do, take this idiot with you.”

“Me going means you win!” Inosuke roared. “God of Festivals!”

“Hah! You’re about a million years too late to beat me.” Uzui snorted in laughter.

Hinatsuru wiped away the sweat beading on Zenitsu’s forehead with a cold cloth as she stared at her husband’s face in profile. He wasn’t in such a good mood just because he’d gotten in the hot spring.

“Lord Tengen,” she called.

Her husband looked back. “What is it, Hinatsuru?”

“Were you really using the hot spring as an excuse to get this boy to improve his foundational strength?” She had assumed he would deny this charge outright, but she was surprised when her husband acknowledged it.

“Well, you know,” he said.

The Uzui Hinatsuru knew was not the sort of man to simply nod in agreement at a time like this.

“This jerk’ll try and skip out the second you take your eyes off of him. I didn’t expect him to team up with the boar and get help, but they’re a surprisingly good combo, huh?”

Hinatsuru stared at her husband chatting happily like she was seeing him for the first time.

These three are my excellent Tsuguko!

She remembered the words she’d heard from her husband in the alley of Yoshiwara. For some reason, she had felt like crying then. Having lost an arm and an eye, and retired as Hashira, her husband had never had a Tsuguko to pass his techniques down to.

These boys had been with her husband in his final battle, after he'd spent so much time cutting down demons to save people while also shouldering the weight of the ninja world, and she thought they were truly wonderful.

"And if these boys ... were actually Lord Tengen's Tsuguko," she murmured without realizing it.

Her husband looked at her, surprised, and then released a small smile. Hinatsuru felt something creak faintly in her heart at that smile.

"I'm not so great as to be able to raise up anyone else. I'm not like Rengoku and Kocho." His voice was gentle and somehow sad.

Lord Tengen ...

Sometimes, she wondered if he wasn't actually a very sensitive person. If only he hadn't been raised a shinobi. If he hadn't been forced to kill from a young age. If he had been able to live in a place where the sun shone as a regular human being ... The truth was, he was a gentle person.

Aren't you trying to raise them up right now?

These boys who he had once fought alongside—wasn't he trying to train them in his own way and make it so that they would survive the battles that lay ahead, no matter how fierce? Hinatsuru didn't try to communicate these thoughts to her husband.

Before their final mission, they had sworn to each other under the burning red sky of dusk. Once everything was over, they would live out in the light, where the sun shone. They would move forward even if one of them was missing at that time.

But they had all managed to live through it. And now they were able to train the children who would bear the burden of tomorrow. That was more than enough.

"Hey, you! You're gonna pickle yourself! Get out already! You lose your mind?!"

"Shut up ... No one ... gives me ... orders ..."

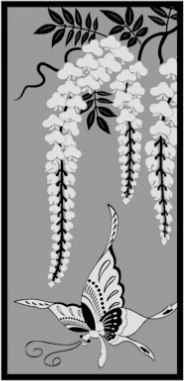
"Unh ... Mixed ... My ... mixed bathing ..."

Inosuke, red as a lobster, groaned in response to her husband's exasperated command, and even Zenitsu muttered incoherently at the sound of his voice.

"Aah, come on! I'm done with you. Just go to Tokito's already!"

Hee hee ...

Hinatsuru giggled to herself as she closed her eyes. Behind her eyelids, she felt like she could see the smiling faces of the three boys all grown-up, even stronger, and her husband standing next to them, essentially retired, complaining.



The background of the entire page is a dark, textured surface with a repeating geometric pattern of small, light-colored diamonds. Overlaid on this are several white, swirling, smoke-like lines that flow across the page. In the center, there is a large circular frame. Inside this frame, the background is white with faint, light gray floral and scrollwork patterns. A large, dark, stylized circular window with a grid-like pattern is centered within the circular frame. The text "Chapter 3" is written in a cursive font, and "MITSURI KANROJI'S SECRET" is written in a bold, sans-serif font, both centered within the circular window. A detailed illustration of a butterfly is positioned at the bottom left of the circular window, appearing to fly towards the right.

Chapter 3
**MITSURI KANROJI'S
SECRET**

The first time I met her, I thought she was such a beautiful girl. Porcelain skin, clear violet eyes. Surprisingly slender and lovely. Kind to everyone, regardless of who they were. Strong, smart, cute, brave—a truly magnificent girl.

I'd love to get close to her. How great it would be if we could talk and talk forever ...

When I happened to hear this story, my mind went blank. I couldn't even begin to process it.

"Lady Kocho watched as her parents were killed by a demon right before her eyes. And then her older sister Kanae on top of that ... And in such a fashion ..."

Aah, I didn't know.

Shinobu. I didn't know.

"Listen, I joined the Demon Slayer Corps to find a man to marry. After all, as a girl, you wanna have someone stronger than you, right? You wanna be taken care of. You get what I'm saying, don't you, Shinobu?"

I never would have said that if I'd known. Such a frivolous reason. If I'd known about Shinobu's past, I definitely would never have told her that.

Aah. I'm such an idiot.

I wonder how she felt when we had that conversation? She looked sort of surprised. Then she said with her usual smile, "Well, mm-hmm. I'm not so sure myself" and "I'm sure you'll find someone wonderful, Kanroji."

She must've been so disgusted. I bet she was angry. Maybe she was all "How can I be in the same group as this flake?"

Hey, Shinobu. I ...

So I ...



"Does Kanroji seem off?"

Shinobu Kocho cocked her head to one side at this sudden question from her

colleague. They were in the medical office of the Butterfly Mansion where she lived as the Insect Hashira. While she developed poisons to attack demons, she also treated and took care of Demon Slayers injured in battle.

The majority of mansion visitors were injured people. Still, her colleague Obanai Iguro—without a scratch—came to see her and immediately began expressing his concern about the Love Hashira, Mitsuri Kanroji. A serious look fell over his face.

“Off in what way?” she asked.

“In every way. Thoroughly off. You haven’t noticed?” Iguro reproached her.

As if they had arranged it beforehand, the snake wrapped around his neck flicked out its long tongue at the same time. This was the Snake Hashira’s pet, Kaburamaru, more beloved than any dog.

“Hmm, let me think.” Shinobu traced the area around her upper lip with her index finger. She tried to remember how the Love Hashira had seemed at their most recent Hashira Training. “No, nothing in particular.”

“What have you even been looking at? Are your oversized eyes peepholes? Are they just for decoration?” Iguro snarked and let out an enormous sigh.

I don’t exchange letters with Kanroji as frequently as you do, you know. She swallowed these words and smiled apologetically.

“Well now, I’m terribly sorry.”

Although it was the middle of the day, when the demons weren’t able to be out and about, the Hashira with their many responsibilities were extremely busy. The fact that he had pushed all of that aside to come here meant that he was not just here for show or on a whim.

In contrast with his seemingly hostile appearance, Iguro considered his friends above all else.

“Could you tell me exactly what about Kanroji has been off?” Shinobu asked. “Anything you’ve personally noticed is fine.”

Iguro nodded meekly. “Fifty.”

“Sorry?”

“Normally she eats a hundred dumplings, but she only had fifty. Get it? Just fifty? *The Kanroji*. Famed lover of dumplings.”

Shinobu unconsciously took a step back as she saw how serious Iguro was, confronted directly by his bloodshot eyes.

Reflexively, he leaned toward her.

“And her replies to my letters are very curt. Terribly concise, and formal almost, like we’re not friends. Why? It’s strange. All of it’s plain weird.”

“Aoi. Iguro is leaving now.” Shinobu turned her back to Iguro and called to the girl outside of the treatment room. “Iguro, you can go out that way.”

“That’s not all.” Iguro ignored Shinobu’s sarcasm and continued. “At the Hashira Training, Kanroji wouldn’t meet the eyes of any of the Hashira. And not just the Hashira. She wouldn’t meet Master Ubuyashiki’s eyes either.”

Taken aback, Shinobu looked back at her colleague. The Hashira were one thing, but Ubuyashiki? Mitsuri respected and worshipped Kagaya Ubuyashiki with all her heart. Like the rest of them, she held Ubuyashiki in the highest esteem. As far as Shinobu knew, Mitsuri had never once gone against any of his decisions. Above all else, he was Ubuyashiki. If she was averting her eyes from even Master Ubuyashiki ... well, something was indeed off.

“After that, Tokito picked up a handkerchief she dropped, and when he called out to her, she practically jumped through the ceiling and then ran away.”

“That is indeed strange.”

Normally, Mitsuri would clutch her hands to her chest happily and express her honest gratitude with a “Thank youuuu, Muichiro.”

“Was that when you first noticed that something was off with Kanroji?” Shinobu asked.

“No, she was already acting strangely twelve days earlier.”

The fact that he so smoothly produced such a specific number was ripe for making fun of. But if that were true, it meant that she had already been out of sorts for nearly two weeks. That was truly worrisome.

“She might be sick or something. I’ll try poking around and asking her myself,

but you keep an eye on her too. Okay, Kocho?” Iguro concluded. Once Shinobu nodded in agreement, he left, apparently having told her what he’d come to say.

Alone again, Shinobu sat on a chair in the treatment room. He didn’t have to come all the way out here; he could have simply written a letter and had his Kasugai Crow bring it to her. When she thought about how he was simply that concerned about Mitsuri, she smiled fondly at how cute it all was.

“Goodness. When it comes to Kanroji, Iguro really does strike immediately.” She leaned back in her chair and sighed. The sweet, charming face of Mitsuri Kanroji, the only other female Hashira, popped into her mind.

“Shinobu! Shinobu!”

The older girl with her innocent smile cozying up to Shinobu like a kitten. She smiled to herself at this picture in her mind.

The wind outside shook the branches of the cherry trees, now devoid of pink blossoms and covered only with green leaves.



The thin, flexible blade ran through the dark night like a living creature.

“Love Breathing! First Form! Trembles of First Love!”

Twisting in the air, the blade sliced through the flesh of the enormous demon faster than the eye could see. The demon’s head tumbled to the ground, and Mitsuri let out a short sigh. Unlike in a usual fight, her body felt strangely heavy. She thought her strike was also poor. It was like there was a fog in her brain, making everything hazy.

“Thank you so much ... Thank you.” The man of the couple she’d rescued bowed over and over.

“A-are you all right?” the woman asked, trembling.

“Hm? All right?” Mitsuri raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“You ... You’re injured ...”

“Me? Injured—” Noticing the woman’s eyes focused on her cheek, Mitsuri wiped at it lightly with the palm of one hand. It came away with blood on it. She finally realized she had been hurt.

“Because of us ... Because you rescued us.” The woman cried apologetically.

“Thank you so, so very much.” The man bowed deeply once more.

Mitsuri hurriedly waved her hands. “Oh, don’t worry about it. A little thing like this is nothing. Sorry for scaring you. Anyway, I’m just happy you’re both okay.”

The man teared up. “The truth is, my wife’s carrying a baby.”

“What? Really? A baby?” Mitsuri looked at the woman in surprise, and her face brightened at last.

Tears wet on her cheeks, she smiled bashfully. “I’m about three months along.” Her belly was indeed swelling out.

“Isn’t that something!” Mitsuri cried. “Congratulations. You take good care of that baby.”

“We owe our family’s lives to you. Thank you so much!” The man thanked her for the nth time, and then the young couple walked away on the night road, leaning on each other. Mitsuri watched them go until they disappeared from sight as she placed a hand over her chest.

Ba-dmp, ba-dmp. Her heart was pounding.

What if the demon attack that had cut her cheek had hit the woman’s stomach instead? The thought of it instantly terrified her.

It hadn’t been an especially weak demon. But it also had definitely not been too strong for her. Normally, she would have been able to help them and come out of it without a single scratch on her.

And then I wouldn’t have given her such a scare when she’s pregnant.

The damp night breeze caressed her cheek as Mitsuri let her finger gently trace the cut on it. She had almost no pain, but she couldn’t help feel something precious was spilling from the wide-open wound.



“Phew.”

Having finished guard duty for the night, Mitsuri walked through town, practically dragging her incredibly dense body along in the bright light of the sun that poured down on her.

She went into a restaurant she frequented and ordered the tempura rice bowl, soba, grilled fish, rice, and miso soup. While this might have seemed like quite a lot for someone to be eating first thing in the morning, it was about a tenth of what Mitsuri normally ate. Before too long, tea was brought to her, and she sipped at it absently. She sighed again.

Ever since she had found out, she’d had herself under tight control and was trying not to have giddy feelings about anyone and everyone. To be blunt, she had locked away love. To make herself relinquish her wicked reason for joining the Demon Slayer Corps—to find a man to marry and spend her days with—she’d banished the daily thrills and sparks of true love to focus on her duties.

But as if sneering at this determination of hers, the world continually presented her with things that made her heart leap up recklessly in her chest. *Why would it only be at a time like this ... ?* The ridiculously poor timing made her want to cry. The last Hashira meeting had been the absolute worst.

She’d happened to take shelter from the rain with the Flame Hashira, Kyojuro Rengoku, and he’d thrown his jacket over her shoulders, saying “You’ll catch cold! Wear this, Kanroji!” And she’d seen the Stone Hashira Gyomei Himejima secretly cradling a kitten, telling it “Namu. Cute kitty ...” and looking surprisingly adorable. She’d come across the Wind Hashira Sanemi Shinazugawa sneaking food to what appeared to be an abandoned puppy. Plus, she’d witnessed the Water Hashira Giyu Tomioka dozing sweetly on the veranda, which set her heart pounding. And when she’d staggered and nearly tripped, Uzui caught her with a “Careful there. Don’t go falling.” Then Iguro had invited her to a new udon restaurant.

Just keeping her heart under control when it threatened to pound in constant

delight, out of control, was a lot for Mitsuri. In the end ...

“Mitsuri, is there maybe something you’re worried about? I’m here to listen if you want to talk.”

Even Master Ubuyashiki is worried about me. And I ran away when Muichiro called out to me on the way home ...

The worst. She hadn’t even been able to look at any of them, including Shinobu, because she’d been so nervous. *What am I even doing?*

After all that, someone who wasn’t even one of the Twelve Kizuki had hurt her. Shoulders slumping dejectedly, Mitsuri picked at the tempura bowl the serving woman had brought her.

How can I keep going like this? she wondered absently. The piece of tempura she had pinned in her chopsticks slipped out and fell back into the bowl. There was still over two-thirds of the rice left. She should have been hungry, but she just didn’t feel like eating. In fact, no matter what she put in her mouth, it was like chewing sand. Nothing tasted even vaguely delicious.

She hadn’t felt like this since the first arranged match of her life had ended so spectacularly.

“You have the same physique as a regular person, but eight times the muscle. Meaning you have a high muscle density.”

It was none other than Shinobu who had taught her this.

“This is why you have to eat plenty. People with a lot of muscle mass have a higher basal metabolic rate. Please ensure that you eat at least eight times that of the average person.”

“But I’m a girl,” Mitsuri protested. “If I eat that much, it’s ... Isn’t that creepy? People might hate me.”

“Don’t force yourself to be with anyone who tells you not to get the nutrition you need. You can just do this with people like that,” Shinobu said, and still smiling sweetly, she pretended to punch a person who wasn’t there. “Right?”

“Oh, Shinobu!” How that smile and those words had soothed her soul!

A few days after she spoke with Shinobu, she went for dinner with Iguro.

Fearful, she asked for the food she wanted, trembling inside. He had the smallest appetite of any of the Hashira and only ordered tea and a little bit to eat, but he didn't reproach Mitsuri for her large meal. He even asked for some extra food for her, saying, "Have some of this too."

He was also the one who had casually given her the long, striped socks without acting in the least like he was doing her any kind of favor. That was when Mitsuri had been embarrassed at how much skin her uniform left exposed, but she couldn't burn her uniform in front of the tailor like Shinobu had.

"Kanroji! So you are here."

Surprised at the familiar voice, Mitsuri lifted her face and was stunned to see the very Iguro she had just been thinking about. "I-Iguro?! Why?!"

"I wanted to talk to you, so I came looking for you." He sat down in the seat across from her and scowled severely for some reason. "Kanroji, what's the matter? This ..."

"Huh?" Flustered, she looked at her bowl. "Did I spill some rice?" Was she eating messily? She couldn't actually have bits of rice stuck to her face, could she? But Iguro found fault with something else entirely.

"Why is there a cut on your cheek?" His voice was colder than absolute zero.

"Oh! This? During guard duty yesterday ... I was careless," she replied timidly, and Iguro's eyes flew open. She had never seen such a harsh look on the face of her normally cool and collected colleague. A cold sweat sprang up on her forehead.



He's angry because I'm a Hashira, and I still got hurt by a demon who's not even one of the Twelve Kizuki. I'm worthless. Ah, I think he's rolling his eyes at me.

She shrank into herself, trying to be smaller, and Iguro abruptly got to his feet.

"Where?" he demanded.

"Eeep!" Mitsuri jumped reflexively.

"Where is that piece of garbage?"

"Huh?"

"The piece of garbage that marred your rosy cheek, Kanroji."

"Huh? Oh. That ..." She started to tell him she'd killed it, but Iguro interrupted her with a groan, his voice filled with rage.

"That piece of garbage deserves a thousand deaths. I am going to carve it up right now until it is nothing but thin slices." He looked ready to fly out of the restaurant at any second, and Mitsuri hurried to stop him.

"W-wait, Iguro! It's already gone. Um. You know, because I cut its head off. So ..."

Iguro finally came back to himself, and the bloodlust radiating from his small body disappeared as he plopped back down in the seat across from Mitsuri. He put a hand to his forehead. "Sorry. Me of all people, forgetting myself in anger," he muttered as if embarrassed.

"Iguro?" *So he wasn't mad at me.* He was actually just that worried about her. Warmth filled her heart.

Now that she was thinking about it, Iguro had been kind to her right from the time she joined the Demon Slayer Corps. He had always found some reason to watch out for her.

And now, sounding somehow awkward, he said, "Kanroji. Is something bothering you?"

"What?"

"I'm happy to listen if you want to talk."

“Iguro ...”

“I want to help if I can.”

Her heart leaped up in her chest and pounded loudly at his earnest tone and serious gaze. In that moment, the face of Shinobu Kocho rose up in the back of her mind.

“Ngh! No!”

“Kanroji?”

She leaped to her feet, and Iguro stared up at her, dumbfounded. Mitsuri absolutely could not meet his eyes.

“I-I just remembered I have a thing! I’m sorry. I’m going now, okay?” She managed to get this much out before shoving some money for her order at the manager and flying out of the shop, practically tumbling out the door.

Iguro, I’m so sorry! I’m really sorry!

Just when he had been so kind to come looking for her, worried. Just when he’d said he wanted to help her.

But that just makes my heart pound with emotion for Iguro.

Not only could she not talk to him about what was bothering her, she was honestly backed against the wall by the feelings he stirred up in her. She couldn’t turn to him the way she always did. Mitsuri fled the restaurant and only relaxed when there were several storefronts between her and it.

I have to figure this one out by myself. I can’t lean on Iguro forever. She slapped her cheeks with both hands forcefully. But the fog hanging over her head didn’t clear in the slightest.

And then, a few days later ...

“Haaah.”

Not only did the uncomfortable haze torturing her not go away, it increased with each passing day. She found it hard to breathe, and her body was leaden. Maybe because of that, she couldn’t use Love Breathing that well. She was obviously weakening. *I ... Honestly, what is wrong with me?*

Would she be able to continue as a Hashira in this condition? Just when she was filled with self-pity and sadness, a message arrived from Shinobu.

“Would you mind stopping by the Butterfly Mansion whenever it’s convenient for you, Kanroji?”

This invitation, which would normally have delighted her, caused Kanroji even further torment. *I wonder what Shinobu wants ...* It would be awkward to see her now. But she couldn’t exactly ignore the invitation either. As Mitsuri headed toward the Butterfly Mansion on heavy feet, she heard a cry from behind.

“Ah! You’re the ... lady Demon Slayer?”

She looked back at the sound of the bewildered voice.

“It is. I knew it was you!”

Standing there was a boy she had saved along with his mother when they were attacked by a demon. His deeply tanned face split into a happy grin.

“This is great! I been looking all over for you.”

“For me?” Mitsuri blinked rapidly in surprise. “What? You need to talk? Are you in trouble?”

The boy suddenly looked around as if he was worried someone might overhear them. And then he lowered his voice and said, “Actually, the restaurant my mom works at is right near here.” Apparently, it was something that he didn’t want his mother to know about.

“If Mom hears, she’ll be up in my face about it.” The mere child spoke like a man.

“Goodness ... Is that so?” Mitsuri suppressed a smile and led him to a teahouse she frequented a little further off.

They sat down together on the bench outside, and the boy gladly devoured a skewer of dumplings.

“How are you?” she asked. “You’ve gotten bigger, hm? You look so much taller.”

“I grew six inches since then!” he announced proudly.

“Six inches? Boys grow up so fast!” Mitsuri smiled brightly.

She had a little brother right about this age. She couldn’t help but look at this boy as though he were her own brother.

“And? You wanted to talk to me?”

The boy gulped down the last of his dumplings and slowly opened his mouth. “So, like, I wanna be a carpenter.”

“Oh my! How wonderful,” she said. “Are you good at making things?”

“Well, y’know. My dad was a carpenter before he died.”

“My ...” Mitsuri was at a loss for how to respond.

The boy read the wrong thing into her hesitation. “Dad died three years ago now.” His black eyes focused on the empty air in front of him. “He got washed away in the river when he was putting up a bridge. He was a good carpenter, but he wasn’t too good at swimming.”

“He wasn’t ...” Mitsuri lightly bit her lower lip. She stared at the boy’s tanned face.

She remembered only too clearly the face of his mother as she clutched her son to her and wept fat tears when Mitsuri rescued them from the demon. She had bowed over and over and over, so deeply that it looked like she would prostrate herself on the ground at any second.

Thank you so much for saving my son. Thank you so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Hearing about what had happened to the father now, the memory was unbearably sad.

“It’s ’cause of that that Mom doesn’t want me to be a carpenter. It makes her think of Dad, and she hates that. She says she wants me to open a haberdashery or be a tailor or a town official. But I don’t want to do any of that stuff. I wanna be a carpenter.”

The boy clenched his hand into a fist and continued. “I’m gonna apprentice with this boss my dad knew. It’s a secret from my mom. It’s all settled.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Mitsuri asked, baffled.

The boy stammered a bit before answering with extreme honesty. “I-it’s just, when you saved me and Mom, you were super cool.”

“What?” Now she was even more baffled. Back then, she’d been a novice Demon Slayer, still wet behind the ears. And while she’d had physical strength, she definitely hadn’t been strong. She’d swung her sword wildly and eventually managed to beat the demon’s head off.

She’d been desperate, struggling. *Cool* was not a word any-one could have used to describe her then, not even to flatter her.

“But I mean, back then, I was still totally weak, you know. I could only win using the most pathetic tactics. I wasn’t the least bit coo—”

“You were so cool!” the boy shouted, cutting her off. “You fought with everything you had for us, total strangers. You’re a girl, but you got totally beat up and still kept fighting for us. You were cooler than anybody in this world.”

The boy’s honest words shot her through the heart. Perhaps because he was excited, his earlobes were red like the evening sun.

“And when I saw you like that, I had this thought. Like, I wanted to be like that too. I wanted to help people by doing what I really wanted to do. I don’t want to give up or have a bunch of regrets. My mom can cry all she wants, but I’m gonna be a carpenter. I’m gonna build an even more amazing bridge than my dad did.”

Mitsuri didn’t know what to say to that.

“I wanted to tell just you at least,” he continued. “That’s why I been looking for you all this time. Okay, bye. Thanks for the dumplings!” The boy ran off, or perhaps ran away.

She didn’t even have the time to call out and stop him. He grew smaller and smaller until he finally disappeared into the crowd. Mitsuri could only stare, dazed, at the town now empty of the boy.



“Lady Kanroji, thank you so much for coming. Lady Shinobu is waiting for you.”

When she arrived at the Butterfly Mansion, Aoi Kanzaki led Mitsuri out to the training ground, a troubled look on her face. Shaken, Mitsuri wondered to herself, *Why the training ground?*

The training ground was, as its name suggested, a dojo used for Shinobu’s personal training and that of her Tsuguko, alongside the functional recovery training they did with the injured Demon Slayers. This wasn’t the first time that Mitsuri had visited the Butterfly Mansion, but it was the first time she’d been called out to the dojo.

After Aoi left with a worried expression, Mitsuri nervously pulled open the door to the training ground. “Umm, Shinobu?”

“Hello, Kanroji.” Shinobu was sitting in the center of the large dojo with two wooden swords next to her. And her usual smile was not on her face. She glanced toward Mitsuri with what seemed to be a cold expression and then grabbed the wooden swords, stood up, and tossed one of the weapons at Mitsuri.

Huh? Mitsuri caught it reflexively.

With the same hard look on her face, Shinobu asked, “Would you mind sparring with me a little?”

She might have phrased it as a question, but it was clear Mitsuri wasn’t being offered a choice. The tip of Shinobu’s wooden sword turned toward Mitsuri.

“Huh? Whu—uh? Shinobu?” Mitsuri grew nervous, not understanding what was going on. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Shinobu step forward soundlessly.

She was suddenly in front of Mitsuri, knocking the wooden blade out of her hands. The dull sound of the sword hitting the floor echoed through the dojo.

“What was that?” Shinobu turned sharp eyes on Mitsuri, who stood rooted to the spot, stunned. “I didn’t even use half my strength. You would normally have dodged that quite easily, Kanroji, no matter how off guard I caught you.”

“Oh ... umm.” Mitsuri was baffled at how hard and full of reproach the other girl sounded.

“It seems that you’re not able to make proper use of breathing.”

“Th-that’s ... Uh ...” Shinobu had hit far too close to home, making Mitsuri shrink even further into herself.

Shinobu sighed almost silently and lowered her wooden sword. She turned her cool gaze on Mitsuri. “You look pale. Your cheeks are hollow. Is this because you are not taking in the nutrition necessary to maintain your muscle mass?”

Mitsuri gasped.

“I am most certainly not a powerful sword wielder,” Shinobu continued. “But you’re different, Kanroji. Your easygoing long sword, your surprisingly flexible muscles, the strength that you were born with and—above all else—your almost overly honest personality make you an astonishing swordswoman.”

Mitsuri felt forced into silence.

“Kanroji,” Shinobu said, her voice devoid of emotion. “Why are you trying to make yourself weak?”

Mitsuri’s heart leaped up in her chest. She looked at Shinobu timidly, and Shinobu looked back at her. The sound of her gulping seemed like it came from someone else. If she was going to talk about it, it had to be now. But ...

No ... I can’t say it ... I just can’t.

If she spoke honestly, she would end up hurting Shinobu. She would make Shinobu remember something unpleasant, something sad.

No, that wasn’t it. The truth was, she was scared to say it. She was saying it was for Shinobu’s sake while it was actually for her own sake. She was afraid of laying herself bare and having her beloved Shinobu hate her. She was afraid of ruining the closeness they’d shared up to now. She was so scared of losing her friend, she could hardly stand it.

Mitsuri hung her head as if to escape Shinobu’s gaze and clutched one shaking hand with her other hand.

I don’t know what to do. I need some other reason ...

The moment she had this thought, she heard a voice in her ear.

“You were super cool!”

Ah!

Mitsuri jerked her head up. The boy who had said that, as a newbie, she had been cooler than anyone else out there. When she'd saved him and his mother from the demon, she had been relieved from the bottom of her heart. She had been so terribly glad they were still alive. She'd felt like she finally found a place where she could belong, outside of her family.

“Thanks.”

She had actually wanted to thank them.

No. I can't lie to her here.

If she did that, she wouldn't be able to keep being here in this place. She'd never be able to face Shinobu again.

I have to tell her what's going on with me. Mitsuri squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them to look her colleague directly in the eyes.

“Shinobu. So ...”

Just saying that much, the inside of her mouth completely dried out. And even she could tell her voice was climbing higher and higher.

“I ... heard ... about your past. From the Kakushi.”

Shinobu stared at her with the same hard expression. Mitsuri couldn't read even a hint of emotion or upset in it. What if Shinobu had total control over her feelings? How much time had she spent training before she was able to manage that?

The little girl whose parents had been slaughtered by a demon in front of her, whose beloved older sister had been taken from her. Mitsuri intently pushed back on the image to stop herself from shrinking with the sadness and pain of it.

“I'm ... so embarrassed about my own reason for joining the Demon Slayer Corps. A husband, love ... I should apologize to you. I feel like I'm all wrong like this. I have to be stronger, get it together, but ...”

When she locked love away, she was surprisingly weak. Her Love Breathing was even more deeply tied to her heart than she had thought.

“I finally get it now. I can’t be that. I have to be strong in my own way. Otherwise, I can’t protect anybody.”

Scared of being rejected by this person she loved, she had neglected the people she was actually supposed to be protecting. She had weakened the strength she’d been given and tried to live a lie—even though she had made up her mind to use the power her mother and father had passed on to her to help as many people as she could in a place where she could live without lying to herself.

“This is me! This is Mitsuri Kanroji! All kinds of people make my heart beat faster, I eat a lot, I’m strong ... But ... I ...”

Shinobu remained silent.

“It’s because ... I love you, okay, Shinobu?” Mitsuri said and closed her mouth.

Shinobu’s pale throat moved slightly. “There are many others in the Demon Slayer Corps who have had relatives taken from them by demons.”

Mitsuri’s heart throbbed at her friend’s quiet voice.

“Aoi, Sumi, Naho. They all had their families killed by demons, and with nowhere else to go, they live together here.”

Mitsuri hung her head once more, and a gentle “but” reached her ears.

“But neither I nor those girls harbor any resentment toward you for your family and the environment you were raised in. I also don’t scorn your reason for joining the Demon Slayer Corps. Although, well, I was surprised when you first told me.”

“Huh?” Mitsuri heard a giggle at the end of that statement. Surprised, she lifted her face and met the eyes of Shinobu, who was suppressing a grin. The hard expression was gone, and Shinobu’s usual smile beamed warmly at Mitsuri.

“If all of us walked around filled with hate and sadness, licking each other’s wounds, we’d never move forward. Your cheerful smile keeps us going, you

know, Kanroji?”

“Sh-Shinobu ...” In the other girl’s eyes, Mitsuri saw herself, about to burst into tears at any second. Shinobu’s deep violet eyes were more beautiful than anything in this world, the same as the first time they’d met.

“So please don’t lie to yourself or anything like that,” Shinobu said. “I love you just the way you are, Kanroji.”

Unable to stand it any longer, she threw her arms around the much smaller Shinobu. Her warm tears flowed. “Shinobu, Shinobu, Shinobu, Shinobu!”

“Please excuse me for testing you like that.”

“Uh-uh! It’s okay! It’s totally fine. I was being an idiot.” Mitsuri shook her head vigorously from side to side, still clutching Shinobu.

Shinobu half giggled. “You’ll make sure to eat properly from now on, yes?”

“Uh-huh. I’m gonna eat looads! I’ll eat so much. And then I’ll get even stronger!”

“Iguro’s also been worried about you, you know,” she added in a quiet voice, a little overprotectively.

“Yeah. I’ll apologize to him too. And Muichiro.”

Mitsuri wailed like a child, and Shinobu gently patted her back with her small hand, like she would a toddler. Then she whispered, “The truth is, I’ve always been jealous of your physique, Kanroji.”

“Huh?”

“If I had muscles like you, if I was tall like you ... then ...”

“Sh-Shinobu?”

“I’ve said too much. Please forget that,” Shinobu said in Mitsuri’s arms.

What had she been about to say after “then”?

Mitsuri felt that hidden in that word was a thought so powerful it was painful, a thought that burned even more brightly than anything else Shinobu had said.

The only Hashira who couldn’t cut off a demon’s head. The body she held in

her arms was so insubstantial, so like that of a child, that Mitsuri sobbed even more loudly.

She vowed to herself once more that she would live a life without lies. And she would cut the heads off as many demons as she could so that she could protect the smiles and happiness of as many people as possible—so that she could live with her head held high with her beloved friend in this place she loved.



“Kanroji, why did you join the Demon Slayer Corps?” Tanjiro Kamado asked her in the hallway of the Tecchikawahara residence.

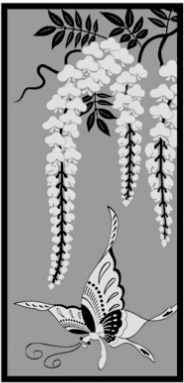
“Who? Me?” Mitsuri replied.

This boy had joined the Demon Slayer Corps to turn his little sister back into a human being after she’d become a demon. His eyes were red like fire and very beautiful. He was staring at her so intently it almost made her falter.

“It’s embarrassing. Do you really wanna know?” Mitsuri fidgeted awkwardly.

Nezuko, having become small like a toddler with a Blood Demon Art, looked up at her curiously, and Mitsuri gently stroked her smooth black hair.

“Umm ...” Mitsuri Kanroji continued with a smile on her face.



Chapter 4
**A DREAM
IN THE MOMENT**

I had a dream that my brother came to visit me. He was standing next to my bed looking at me. I wanted to jump up. I wanted to talk to him, but I was so, so sleepy that I couldn't get up.

That's the dream I had.



When Genya raised his heavy lids, he saw the ceiling of the Butterfly Mansion. In the bed next to him, Tanjiro Kamado was sleeping quietly, bandages wrapped around different parts of his body.

Naturally, his older brother Sanemi wasn't there. *So it was a dream. Well, yeah, I guess.* There was no way his brother would come to visit him.

Feeling pathetic, Genya sat up and met the eyes of the girl who came into the room. One of the three girls here, the one with braids—he was pretty sure her name was Naho.

She stiffened, looking faintly nervous. "Aoiiii! Genya's awake!"

"Sorry, Naho! I can't get away right now! Take his pulse and check his temperature," Aoi replied in a harsh voice from the room next door.

Genya heard the cry of what he assumed was a Demon Slayer and some commotion caused by kicking and flailing. Apparently an emergency case.

Naho nervously approached Genya's bed. "All right, I'll take your pulse now," she said, almost to herself, and tentatively touched his left wrist. He could tell that her small hand was shaking.

Well, of course she's scared.

Back when Genya was eating demon flesh in a quest for greater power, Himejima had introduced him to Shinobu. Ever since then, he'd been coming here from time to time, but he'd never had a real conversation with Shinobu or any of the others. There was the fact that he was awkward with the opposite sex, that particular hallmark of adolescence. But more than that, he'd been constantly on edge back then.

He was annoyed at himself for not even being able to learn breathing. Frustration at the distance he couldn't bridge between himself and his brother made him lash out in anger at everything. Not just demons, but things and people too.

It was only natural she'd be frightened.

"Your pulse is normal. I'll just take your temperature." Naho was still scared, but she deftly carried out the tasks Aoi had assigned her. "Ninety-eight. You don't have a fever either. Do you have any pain?"

He shook his head wordlessly.

"All right then. I'll bring your lunch."

"Oh. I-I'm not eating," he said in a small voice, and he could tell that Naho looked at him with a slightly troubled expression. She wasn't reproaching him. Her gaze was gloomy, anxious. Then there came the sound of glass breaking.

"Eeeek!"

"Please stop that!" He heard cries from the next room.

"Aoi? Sumi?" Naho called, her face pale. She flew out of the room. Genya shuddered at the sound of that name.

Sumi ...

His dead little sister had also been named Sumi. She'd been a spoiled brat, but also a kind girl, and so thoughtful of their mother. She had adored her big brothers Genya and Sanemi.

Genya! He gasped at the sound of his dead sister's voice and leaped up to go after Naho.

When he entered the neighboring room, he found broken glass scattered on the floor. Aoi, Sumi, and Naho were looking toward the bed with frightened expressions. The eyes of the man there shone with hatred and annoyance.

"Please calm down!" Aoi insisted. "You have to rest right now!"

"And what's resting going to get me?! Is it going to grow back my arm?!" the Demon Slayer snarled.

“There’s nothing that can be done about your arm,” Aoi continued. “But you’ve lost an incredible amount of blood. If you push yourself any more than this—”

“You don’t go on missions!” he cut her off. “What do you know?!”

Aoi gasped, at a loss for words. Sumi and Naho hugged each other, trembling.

“I have to take out as many demons as I can!” he shouted. “For Yae’s sake! They murdered her! But now that I’m missing an arm, how exactly am I supposed to swing a sword?!” He grabbed the water jug from the bedside table and threw it at the girls.

“Eeee!” they shrieked.

Genya dashed forward to catch the jug in one hand. Fortunately, it was empty.

The man looked taken aback by Genya’s sudden appearance, but he quickly recovered himself and glared at him. “What do *you* want?”

“You can’t go hitting girls,” Genya told him.

“It’s none of your business,” the man spat.

Genya knew only too well those eyes filled with hatred, impatience, annoyance, and an unfathomable anger and sadness. They had once been his own eyes.

“I don’t care about crows! Katana! I want my katana! And I want it now!”

When he’d survived the Final Selection, he’d slammed his fist into the face of the little girl who was their guide, and he had her hair in his hands when Tanjiro stopped him. These eyes were his from back then. As if he had now been made to see exactly how wild, how twisted he had been, Genya spoke in a deliberately even voice.

“These girls treat the injuries of Demon Slayers free of charge for the sake of the Demon Slayer Corps. Be grateful. You have no right to complain.”

“*You*,” the wounded Demon Slayer protested. “You say that because you’re hardly even hurt! But I—”

“If you lost your good hand, then you can just hold your katana in your other hand,” Genya said flatly. “And if you lose that hand too, hold the blade in your mouth. At least, that’s what I would do.”

“Wha ...”

“If you’re not prepared to do that much, then quit the Demon Slayer Corps.”
Now he looked into the man’s eyes for the first time.

The man fell into a brief, dazed silence and then finally began to weep. “Yae ... Yae ...”

A lover or a sister, maybe. He cried the name of his lost loved one. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry ... Yae ... I’m sorry ...”

No one said a word.

Eventually, it wasn’t just the man crying. Sumi and Naho both started to weep. Genya couldn’t stand it in there any longer, and he left the room without a word. He had no right to scold that man. Him ... He would’ve done that better. Tanjiro would’ve empathized with the man and spoken to him kindly, amiably somehow ...

He really was broken. He couldn’t do a single thing properly. This was probably why his brother wouldn’t look at him.



I don’t remember my dad ever hugging me. In fact, I don’t even remember him smiling at me. But it definitely wasn’t like I wanted *this* dad to hug me, this man who walked around, breath stinking of alcohol from morning until night, who hit Mom whenever he got the chance. I did what I could to make sure me and my brother were more or less able to take care of our younger brothers and sisters together.

I tried, anyway.

“Genya. Ah, this is where you are.”

“S-Sanemi ...”

I screwed up my face in annoyance when my brother found me in my special hiding place on the stone steps of a shrine a bit of a walk from the long house we lived in. I was sure there was no way my brother would find me. He really was amazing.

“Hey. It’s almost dark. Let’s head home. Mom’s not mad or anything.” He sounded the same as ever.

I almost nodded automatically and then desperately held myself back. Maybe it was my tiny shred of pride as a little kid. The truth was, I was anxious and super happy that Sanemi had come to get me. But I felt like if I just wagged my tail and went home with him, I’d never be a man.

Silently, I shook my head vigorously from side to side, and Sanemi sighed just like a grown-up would. Though we were almost the same size, Sanemi was always way ahead of the rest of us. I used to rely on that about him, but lately, I’d felt a bit of regret.

“You hit him ’cause he was making fun of Sumi, right? The whole ‘poor people with tons of kids’ thing.”

I nodded.

“Aah,” Sanemi sighed in exasperation.

I’d gone and slammed a fist into the face of the son of the landlord just because he’d said a little thing like that. The moment I saw Sumi crying, my mind had gone blank. Blood flowed from the landlord’s son’s nose.

Our whole family could be chased out of the place where we lived the next day. And then what would happen to Mom and everyone? *All because I couldn’t control my temper ...*

Sanemi must have been fed up with his thoughtless little brother. That’s what I thought, but ...

“Then you didn’t do anything wrong, now did you?” Sanemi said.

I jerked my head up. “Huh?”

“You did a great job of protecting your little sister, being a real big brother. Hold your head up high.”

“Sanemi ...” I stared intently at my brother. He grinned. He almost never smiled, but when he did, his face was honestly so kind. He looked like Mom, and me and all the little ones loved his smiling face. All kinds of things welled up in me at the same time, and my throat grew so hot it was almost painful.

“Let’s go home,” he said. “Mom’s worried.”

“Okay.” I nodded and stood up from the stone steps.

The area was dyed the color of the setting sun. My brother ahead of me was also red in the light. As I looked at him, I had the sudden desire to be babied. I was the second oldest after Sanemi, and Mom was always too busy taking care of our little brothers and sisters, so she never really babied me.

“Sanemi,” I called to him. “Piggyback.”

“What? You hurt or something?” He looked back at me in surprise.

I could feel myself turn red up to the ears. Naturally, I wasn’t hurt.

“A-actually, forget it,” I said hurriedly and quickly walked past him.

“Come on then.” He crouched down and turned his back to me. “Just this once.”

“Okay.”

I was beet red from embarrassment or shame or whatever it was. But my happiness won out over my awkwardness, and I clambered onto my brother’s back.

It felt way bigger than it looked. If I’d had a dad—I mean, if my dad had actually been a proper dad—I just know his back would’ve felt like this.

“Mom’s making ohagi,” Sanemi said casually.

“Really?” I replied. “Is there a lot?”

“Yeah. Me and Teiko were helping.”



“So that’s why you smell like ohagi.”

“I smell like ohagi?”

“Yeah. Aah, I’m hungry.”

We chatted about nothing special as I rocked back and forth on my brother’s back. Then I had a sudden thought.

I could get my brother to baby me because I was his kid brother. But who would baby him? He was Mom’s right hand, working even though he was a kid. Taking care of his little brothers and sisters with an unreliable dad. Who on earth was there to baby him?

Sanemi.

Sanemi ...



I’m sorry, brother.

“Genya, are you awake? I brought your medication.”

When he opened his eyes, he was indeed in a hospital room at the Butterfly Mansion. Naho—no, the girl with pigtails, Sumi, was peering at him.

Of course, his brother was not there. The warmth of his brother’s small but big back faded abruptly. Genya sat up and stared vacantly at the hands he had thrown over Sanemi’s shoulders. They were big, sturdy hands, totally different from how they had been on that day so long ago. Maybe because of the demon flesh he’d eaten, they were not so different from his brother’s now.

“Are you all right?” Sumi asked timidly.

Genya looked at her with a question, and for some reason, she averted her eyes.

“Er ... those tears,” she said apologetically.

Genya finally realized he was crying. He hurriedly wiped his face with a hand.

Sumi asked no further questions as she put a supportive hand on his back and

gave him the medicine that Shinobu had prepared.

In the bed next to his, Tanjiro still hadn't woken up. *Why's he still asleep at this hour? Wake up already and ease the tension in the room.* He sent this prayer at the peacefully sleeping face, but Tanjiro merely let out a contented sigh.

"Is it bitter?" Sumi asked.

"Yeah." He nodded.

"Do you want some more water?"

"No."

The conversation ended there. Genya was flustered.

"Did you have a fight with your brother?" Sumi asked him hesitantly.

"Huh?" He stared at her blankly.

"In your sleep ... you said, 'I'm sorry, brother.'"

His face froze, and the girl abruptly changed the subject.

"Thank you so much for helping us earlier." She bowed neatly.

"Oh ... sure," Genya answered vaguely, glad at least to avoid the topic of his brother. He let his eyes wander the room aimlessly. "How's that angry Demon Slayer now?"

Sumi lowered her eyes. "He's calmed down considerably. He's in bed now. He'll be transferred to a proper hospital tomorrow. They'll decide how to treat him from now on."

Genya wasn't sure what to say to that. "Yeah?" he muttered and then followed with a question. "Are you okay? I mean, not hurt or anything?"

"What?" She frowned.

"I heard that glass shattering."

"Ohh." Sumi smiled, understanding at last.

They didn't look the least bit alike, but he felt like it was his baby sister smiling at him. His heart throbbed painfully in his chest.

“Thanks to you, we were all fine,” she told him. “Aoi and Naho came to thank you, but you were asleep.”

“Yeah? That’s great then.” Genya sighed.

Sumi stared intently at his face without blinking. Just when her direct gaze was starting to make him nervous, she asked tentatively, “Is the Wind Hashira your brother?”

After a second, Genya nodded silently. The lukewarm breeze that came in through the open window toyed with his cheeks unpleasantly.

“Did Kocho tell you that?” he asked in a hoarse voice, and Sumi shook her head.

“It was the name. And you also look very much like him.” She probably didn’t mean anything in particular by these words. But they pierced deeper into his heart than he’d expected. They really did look alike ... Enough that a stranger would think so looking at them.

And yet ...

“You just don’t give up. I don’t have a little brother. Just quit the Demon Slayer Corps.”

This was how his brother had greeted him when they met again at long last. He had sweated blood, sacrificed so much, and finally gotten to speak to his brother. And yet, all he got from Sanemi were a cold stare and a hard rejection.

“I’ve only seen the Wind Hashira a handful of times,” Sumi continued. “And I’m too frightened to go near him, so I can’t really say for certain.”

“H-he’s not scary!” His voice was unconsciously rough, and Sumi flinched.

Coming back to himself, Genya apologized and covered his mouth with a hand. He couldn’t stop himself. He didn’t want the girl with the same name as his little sister to misunderstand his older brother.

“Sanemi’s actually a super nice guy. He looked out for us kids and kept us safe forever. I mean, even our mom relied on him. And ...”

He paused for a moment, and Sumi waited for him to continue.

“When he smiles, his face is ... amazingly kind,” he declared, squeezing the words out.

Sumi’s eyes reflected him quietly, eyes filled with a deep mercy. Eyes so kind, it almost made him sad.

This girl had seen her family killed by demons, been rescued by Shinobu as an orphan, and now earnestly nursed Demon Slayers back to health in the Butterfly Mansion.

As if urged on by those eyes, Genya haltingly began to tell the brothers’ story.

He told her how their dad was good for nothing, how he had been hated and stabbed and killed. How Genya and Sanemi had somehow lived as a family as they supported their mother. How one night, a demon came to their house and killed their younger brothers and sisters. How Sanemi had saved him when he was on the verge of being killed by that demon. How when he went outside, he found his brother covered in blood, and the dead body of their mother. How the demon who killed them all had taken on the form of their mother—and how, after fighting desperately to protect their family, his brother had laid hands on their beloved mother.

And how he had cursed that same brother. Called him a murderer. When he said it out loud, it sounded like it had all happened to someone else. He was honestly fed up with how foolish and beyond help he had been back then.

“He’s never forgiven me,” Genya concluded, “for the terrible things I said, for stomping all over his feelings.”

“Genya,” Sumi said softly.

“He won’t talk to me.”

He wouldn’t even acknowledge Genya as his brother. He’d even told him to get out of his sight.

“And yet I ...” He sighed.

He dreamed of his brother back when he was nice. He’d even dreamed that morning that Sanemi had come to see him, so girlish in his pointless dreaming. He knew that this was exactly what he deserved, but his brother’s cold eyes

frightened him nonetheless. His ever-increasing number of scars frightened him. His words of rejection frightened him.

Were they really no longer brothers? That hateful night ... Genya squeezed his hands together anxiously.

“It’s all right,” Sumi said, almost in a whisper, and gently placed her own small hands over his. They were so warm. “As long as you’re still alive, you have the chance to make things right.”

His eyes flew open, and her lips stretched out into a smile.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to make up with your brother.” Her words were endlessly kind, but also held real weight.

Right.

Sumi would never have the chance to see her parents or siblings again. You couldn’t clear up misunderstandings if the other person was dead. You couldn’t talk with them and reminisce about the people you had both lost. This girl had lost everything, and here he was talking like this when he still had his older brother. He was angry at himself.

“Sorry,” he muttered, his voice rough with regret and self-loathing.

“Don’t say sorry, Genya,” a gentle voice chided him. When Genya looked to the side, Tanjiro was smiling warmly from where he lay in the bed next to Genya’s. “At times like this, you have to say ‘thanks.’”

“Tanjiro. You—” His face turned red. To hide his mortification, he yanked on Tanjiro’s cheek. “How long have you been awake? Were you pretending to be asleep?!”

“Ow ow ow,” Tanjiro complained. “I just woke up a second ago. I heard you and Sumi talking. Your scent was saying ‘thanks.’”

“Ngh!”

“G-Genya.” Sumi frowned and tugged on Genya’s arm. “Tanjiro’s very seriously injured, so ... Please, that’s enough.”

Genya reluctantly let go of the other boy as he turned to the girl.

“Thanks,” he declared curtly.

Sumi’s eyes widened in surprise, and then she smiled. “Sure.”

Tanjiro was also grinning.

Genya pulled his blankets up over his head in his great embarrassment and desperately pretended to be asleep.



“Oh! Aoi!” Sumi said as she stepped out of Genya’s hospital room.

Aoi was coming down the hall, arms heaped high with freshly laundered linens. “What’s going on? You’re grinning your head off.”

“Tanjiro’s finally awake,” Sumi told her. “I thought I’d go get him something to eat.”

“Oh! That’s great.” Aoi’s face brightened. “In that case, it’d be better if I changed his sheets later.”

“Yes.”

“How’s Genya?”

“He took his medicine, and he’s sleeping now,” Sumi said, unable to stop a laugh from slipping out.

She remembered how Genya looked as he turned red up to the ears and hid under his covers. Genya Shinazugawa was not nearly as scary as they had thought. He was a truly good person. Yes. She would have to tell Naho and Kiyo about this.

Aoi looked at Sumi curiously and said, “That reminds me. I saw the Wind Hashira this morning. I wonder what he was doing here.”

“What?” Sumi was startled.

“Maybe he got mad and left because Shinobu wasn’t here,” Aoi mused. “If that’s the case, I do feel bad for him.”

“The Wind Hashira ...”

“Oh, right! For Tanjiro’s lunch, start with a thin rice gruel. If he keeps that down all right, you can give him some onigiri and umeboshi right away. The Love Hashira and the Mist Hashira were able to keep down solid food not long after they woke up, so ... Although, those two are special.”

Sumi watched Aoi walk off with her load of sheets and stared back at the door she’d just come out of. She felt like she could picture the figure of an older brother peeking in on his little brother sleeping heavily after being injured on a mission. Obviously, there was no way to know for sure. Perhaps it was just her desire for that to be true.

As long as they were both alive, they could start over again any number of times. They could make up over and over.

Good luck, Genya.

Sumi cheered him on in her heart and headed toward the kitchen on light feet.



“No, Genya. You have to actually eat!”

“Nah. Really. I’m good.”

Since then, Genya had been strangely attached to Sumi, and even now, as he sat up in his bed, the girl trying to get him to eat stew flustered him.

Finally, Aoi chimed in next to them. “You have to eat. Those are Shinobu’s orders, you know. Please chew slowly and take it down a little at a time. We have to get your stomach back to normal working condition.”

They were keeping a very close eye on Genya’s eating, treating him almost like a baby. Your average boy might have been pleased with the situation, but Genya, in the throes of adolescence, would honestly have rather faced a demon.

On top of that, not only did Tanjiro not try to float Genya a lifeboat as he struggled with being surrounded by the girls, the other boy was even happy with Genya’s suffering.

“You’re totally getting along with everyone now, huh, Genya?” he remarked.
“That’s so great.”

This guy’s as optimistic as ever, or maybe actually just off on his own.

He couldn’t even get angry about it anymore.

“Now, Genya. Please open wide.”

“You can take a sip of tea while you eat.”

I wish they’d hurry and give me a new mission, he thought earnestly when, outside the window, he heard an idiotic exchange.

“Inosuke!”

“Imofuke.”

“Inosuke!”

“Imosuke.”

“Boss Inosuke!”

“Broth imosuke.”

“I! No! Su! Ke!”

“I. Mo. Su. Ke.”

“No! It’s Inosuke!”

“It’s imosuke.”

“Eeeeeaaaaaaaaaah!”

“What’s all that?” Genya asked no one in particular, and Tanjiro laughed.

“Oh,” he said. “Inosuke’s teaching Nezuko his name.”

“Inosuke?” Genya frowned. “Who’s that?”

“He was at the Final Selection with us,” Tanjiro told him. “He always wears a boar head and no shirt. And he always wants to compare strength with anyone and everyone with his headlong rush. He’s a good guy. I’m sure you’ll be friends with him in no time, Genya.”

“Uh. From all that, he sounds like a total weirdo,” Genya protested in an

exasperated voice.

“Come on, Genya!” Sumi said. “Don’t try to change the subject. You have to eat. Everyone’s worried about you.”

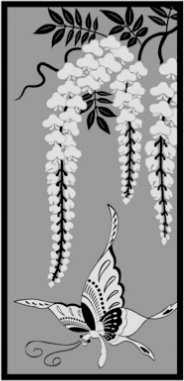
“That’s right,” Aoi joined Sumi in ganging up to scold him. “Even just one bite. Please eat.”

“Okay, say ‘aaah.’”

“Genya.”

“Seriously. Give me a break already,” Genya complained, face lobster red, but Aoi just giggled, as did Tanjiro. And Sumi.

The room at the Butterfly Mansion was filled with gentle laughter. Eventually, even Genya’s face softened into a faint smile.



Chapter 5
TO AN UNSMILING YOU

The bamboo stretching into the heavens made a pleasant sound each time the wind breezed through the grove. In the middle of their sparring, the sky visible in the gaps between the green stalks seemed impossibly high.



“How about we take a break?”

“Okay.”

The ancient bamboo grove was the site for Water Hashira Giyu Tomioka’s training. Tanjiro was currently the only one who had reached this endpoint of the Hashira training that began with the former Sound Hashira Tengen Uzui. That said, he had only arrived a few hours earlier. He’d spent about half of that time unconscious after being punched in the jaw and knocked flying by the Wind Hashira Sanemi Shinazugawa while he was sparring with Tomioka.

Shinazugawa was super angry.

Now Tanjiro was further away than ever from mediating a reconciliation between Genya and his brother. He slumped forward, dejected, and a bamboo container appeared before his eyes.

“Thank you.” He drank the chilled spring water from the canister Tomioka held out wordlessly. The cool liquid soothed his throat.

When he finally felt like a human being again, he spoke to Tomioka sitting beside him. “Do you think Shinazugawa likes smooth bean paste in his ohagi? Or chunky bean paste?”

The old Tomioka would have let this question slide without responding, but he had an answer now. “I like smooth bean paste, but I feel like Shinazugawa would like chunky.”

“Oh, I get that.” Tanjiro nodded in agreement. “My grandma used smooth in her ohagi, so I’m also in the smooth bean paste camp. But I feel like Shinazugawa would prefer chunky.”

“Just in case, when I see Shinazugawa,” Tomioka said, “I’ll make sure to have

both in my pocket.”

“Oh! Then you’re safe either way!”

“How about we have ohagi tonight?”

“I’ll make it!”

The pair got carried away talking about Shinazugawa and ohagi.

Giyu seems like he’s gotten a whole lot happier. While Tanjiro never knew what the older Demon Slayer was thinking, he felt like he was more cheerful lately. He spoke more often too.

Maybe he opened up after the soba-eating contest? I hope so. That’d make me happy. They could have a dumpling-eating contest next. Or would an udon contest be better?

While Tanjiro absently considered foods to compete over, Tomioka asked him, “How has your Hashira training been so far? Difficult?”

“Yes.” Tanjiro’s eyes shone. “But it’s been amazing. And so much fun. Everyone’s so cool, and they go so hard during training. They’re just like grr grr grr, bam! Wham! Slam! Whuk! Crash!”

“And you’re prohibited from contact with Shinazugawa?” For some reason, Tomioka had an extremely faraway look in his eyes as he abruptly changed the subject.

“Oh. That.” Tanjiro shrugged. “I made Shinazugawa angry, and we got into this fight. We dragged in Zenitsu and the other Demon Slayers. I feel bad about it.”

“I often make Shinazugawa angry too,” Tomioka said. “Basically, Shinazugawa’s angry in most situations.”

“Has he always been like that?” Tanjiro asked.

Tomioka nodded. “Now that I’m thinking about it,” he said, his face expressionless, “I too was once ordered to have no contact with Shinazugawa.”

“Huh? You were too, Giyu? Why? Did you have a fight?” Tanjiro was nervous, knowing the history here. He and Shinazugawa alone had done so much

damage. And he'd seen the two Hashira sparring earlier. What would happen if they fought for real? It was too terrifying to even imagine.

"W-was everything okay?" he stammered. "I mean, like the house? The people ... the town?"

"No." Tomioka shook his head. "It wasn't a fight. Shinazugawa got mad at me all on his own. And it wasn't just him. Everyone was acting strangely that day."

Completely ignoring Tanjiro's concern, Tomioka didn't look into the bamboo grove before him, but stared at some empty point in space.. The wind blew up his distinctive bangs, and his eyes narrowed like he was looking at the sun.

"It was when ..."



"What is all this, Himejima?" a gruff voice demanded, obviously annoyed and very out of place in the room that looked onto the beautiful garden of the Ubuyashiki mansion. "I mean, calling us here when there's no Hashira meeting or anything. You've got some explaining to do."

"It's an urgent matter." Himejima didn't so much as flinch under Shinazugawa's glare.

Given his massive physique, even a bear would run from him. It went without saying that the Stone Hashira Gyomei Himejima was the strongest person in the Demon Slayer Corps. In addition to his unparalleled strength, he had also been in the Demon Slayer Corps the longest. Because he was the oldest of the current Hashira, he often took on the role of pulling the whole group together.

"I didn't ask you here on personal business," he said in a short tone. "It was the desire of Master Ubuyashiki."

Shinazugawa clicked his tongue and walked away from his colleague. Once the master's name came up, he couldn't gripe any further. He was extraordinarily loyal to Ubuyashiki.

Of course, the same could be said of everyone gathered there, Shinobu Kocho thought to herself. She frowned. There was a Hashira missing.

“Himejima,” she said. “It seems that Tomioka is not to be seen?”

“Is not to be seen? Don’t be so long-winded, Kocho. He’s not here. And I wouldn’t be surprised at all if he had no intention of coming.” It wasn’t Himejima who replied to Shinobu’s question, but Obanai Iguro. Who exactly was the long-winded one here? Iguro was his usual nagging self.

“I mean, the only thing he cares about is himself. He was probably all, ‘Do what you want. It’s nothing to do with me.’”

“What? That jerk!” Shinazugawa flared in anger at Tomioka, taking Iguro’s supposition as fact.

“Shinazugawa. Iguro was simply imagining a possible situation,” Shinobu interjected gently. It was unfortunate that her colleague could get angry at even idle speculation.

“I told Tomioka to come later,” Himejima finally replied to Shinobu’s question.

“Why would you do that?” she asked curiously.

“What? You mean we’re going to put him on trial in absentia?” Uzui joked lazily. “Makes sense. We’re finally cutting loose the uncooperative Water Hashira?”

“Mm. We can’t do that!” Kyojuro Rengoku shot back immediately, arms crossed. “We can’t go sneaking around in the shadows! If we’re going to do it, we have to stand tall and tell him our complaints! Right, Tokito?”

“I don’t care either way,” Muichiro replied absently when the conversation was suddenly lobbed his way. His glassy eyes were staring at a small bird playing in the garden on the other side of the open shoji doors. “I don’t really understand Tomioka. And I’ll forget soon anyway.”

“I’m with Uzui. We don’t tell him he’s out. We just beat him up right here and now,” Shinazugawa said, cracking his knuckles, and Iguro followed suit.

“I’m also with them,” he said. “That guy makes everything weird.”

“Whaaat?” Mitsuri looked around nervously at her colleagues. “No, we caaaan’t! We all have to be friends!”

Impressive, Tomioka. You’re even more disliked than I thought. Now, now,

what to do here, Shinobu wondered, and an explosive *clap* shook her eardrums.

“Quiet.” Himejima had clapped his hands.

All her hair was standing on end. She had goosebumps from the shock of the sound.

They all snapped their mouths shut, and Himejima glared at the assembled Hashira with his sightless eyes. “He is not being dismissed. I want you to make Tomioka smile when he comes. That’s why I set aside this time for discussion.”

The only one not stunned by these unexpected words was Muichiro. He did not have a thimbleful of interest in any of the goings-on. His eyes had been chasing the little bird in the garden this whole time.

In contrast, Shinazugawa was the most upset by Himejima’s demand, and he lunged toward their unofficial leader once more.

“Huh? Make Tomioka smile? Why would we do something as stupid as that?!”

“Because that is what Master Ubuyashiki wants,” Himejima replied in an even voice. He then conveyed to them what Kagaya Ubuyashiki had told him.



“... which is why I called you here.”

“Master Ubuyashiki ... would like to see Tomioka smile?” Shinobu cocked her head to one side. “Did he really say that?”

“Yes.” Himejima nodded. “He’s concerned that Tomioka doesn’t smile at all. And he said to me, ‘How wonderful it would be to see Giyu truly smile.’”

“Now that we’re talking about it,” Shinobu mused, “I’ve never seen Tomioka smile. I wonder what his smile looks like.”

“I’ve never seen it either,” Mitsuri chimed in.

Uzui jerked his chin at Muichiro staring out into the garden. “But why just Tomioka?”

“True.” Shinobu nodded.

Muichiro Tokito was also famously expressionless.

He'd witnessed his sole blood relation, a twin brother, being killed by a demon, and had been so badly injured he was half dead. He lost his memory, and was basically an empty puppet except for the times when he was hunting demons. Rengoku tended to look out for him, perhaps because he had a younger brother the same age, but Muichiro didn't open up even to him.

Given all that, Shinobu did feel a bit strange that only Tomioka was up for discussion now. Himejima apparently felt the same way.

"I had the same question." He furrowed his brow ever so slightly. "Master Ubuyashiki said that if Tokito can remember his true self, he'll definitely be able to smile again. But Tomioka has deliberately cornered himself. He looks backward because that's what he wants."

"Cornered himself?" Shinobu said. That made sense to her.

She didn't know if it was limited to this current generation, but the various Hashira were relatively idiosyncratic. Except for Rengoku, Mitsuri, and Shinobu herself, they weren't very personable. While Tomioka and Tokito stood out for their expressionlessness, Himejima, Shinazugawa, and Iguro were plenty unsociable. Uzui wasn't particularly unfriendly, but he was fairly moody.

When it came to the relationships between the Hashira at least, they all did well in their own ways. Their pride over their abilities and being the Hashira that were the foundation of the Demon Slayer Corps forced them to get along.

Tomioka was different. He was a bit too selfish, Shinobu thought. He really needed to talk to them more. Shinazugawa in particular, as well as Iguro and occasionally Uzui and Himejima, quarreled with him about everything. That was probably what Ubuyashiki was concerned about.

Basically, he wants us to pay more attention to Tomioka as part of our Hashira group because he tends to stand off on his own.

This was very much the way Ubuyashiki would think. But Himejima, in his overly earnest way, had taken this request at face value. Shinobu wrestled with how to tell him this.

"We just have to make Tomioka smile? That's the request of none other than

Master Ubuyashiki! Kyojuro Rengoku, at the ready!” Rengoku declared loudly, leaping to his feet.

Shinobu nearly lost it. Here was another man taking the instructions at face value.

“Um, Himejima, Rengoku. I think what Master Ubuyashiki was trying to say—” she started.

“I’ll do what I can too!” Mitsuri stood up as well, her cheeks red as she made her declaration. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest, eyes glittering. “I wanna see Tomioka’s smile, and anyway, it’s for Master Ubuyashiki!”

“No, Kanroji. That’s what I’m—”

“That’s the spirit, Kanroji!” Rengoku slapped her shoulder.

“Rengoku ...” Mitsuri brought her hands to her cheeks with a squeal as she reddened even further.

Iguro immediately wriggled his way between the two of them. “If you’re doing it, Kanroji, then I guess I could lend a hand. Although the idea of doing it to make Tomioka smile is impossibly unmotivating.”

“Iguro!” Mitsuri squealed. “Really?”

“Mm.” Rengoku nodded sharply. “Let’s fight together, Iguro! Kanroji!”

“Rengoku, if you get it, then get your hand off Kanroji already,” Iguro snarled.

Shinobu cradled her head in her hands.

With Iguro on board, this was an issue for the whole group now. Mitsuri had once been Rengoku’s Tsuguko apprentice. In the end, she’d been too different from him and gone off on her own. But for a time, they had been master and apprentice. Given that fact, and how Kanroji still felt her heart beat faster in the presence of her former master, she had probably voiced her agreement without thinking too deeply about it.

Shinazugawa yanked himself to his feet angrily.

“Tch! This is ridiculous. If that’s what we’re doing here, then I’m out. You all

have fun making him smile,” he spat, thorns in his voice. He started toward the open doors.

“Shinazugawa!” Himejima called out to the back with the word *kill* carved into it. “Are you going against Master Ubuyashiki’s will?”

Shinazugawa’s feet stopped.

“If you’re prepared to trample all over his request, then go ahead and leave right now.”

“Ngh!”

“I won’t stop you. Whatever else, you’re free to do as you please.” Himejima’s voice was quiet. Because of that, it had an unspeakable power in it.

For a moment, Shinazugawa silently resisted, and then he finally threw himself back down into a sitting position on the floor.

“Now then, shall we think up ways to make Tomioka smile? I’m not very good at making others laugh. Please give me your unreserved opinions,” Himejima said very seriously as he looked out over the group.

No one raised their voice in objection. It seemed that, other than Shinobu, they had all failed to pick up on Master Ubuyashiki’s true intentions. Before the bizarre discussion had even begun, Shinobu was already forced into resignation.



“Excuse me.”

“Oh, Tomioka! You’re late. Well, come on in.” Uzui looked back and called out casually when the late arrival, Tomioka, opened the fusuma sliding door.

Tomioka’s gaze silently traced the room, a curious look on his face—and that was no wonder. Shinobu sympathized with him in her heart. Meeting despite the fact that there was no official Hashira meeting, the Hashira were for some reason arm wrestling. Anyone would be perplexed—she certainly was.

At the three low tables set up in the center of the room, the contests of Muichiro versus Mitsuri, Shinazugawa versus Iguro, and Himejima versus Uzui

were just ending.

The one who had proposed this arm-wrestling tournament was Uzui. Naturally, it wasn't a serious competition. They were going to let Tomioka win and put him in a good mood. It was a simple strategy, but not a particularly bad one. In fact, for Uzui, who lived by the creed of the flashier the better, it was an extremely common-sense plan.

Uzui shook out his right hand after Himejima slammed it into the table. "Lord Himejima here's strong as hell. You give a splashy battle a go too," he urged Tomioka.

"I'll be on my way then," Tomioka said evenly, having recovered from his shock. He turned around to leave.

Shinobu grabbed hold of her colleague's coat. "You're the same as ever, hmm, Tomioka? Deepening the bonds between Hashira is important, you know."

"You can deepen them all you want. It's got nothing to do with me."

"If you leave now, everyone will say that Giyu Tomioka was afraid of Gyomei Himejima and ran off with his tail between his legs. You know? Is that what you want?" Shinobu said. Tomioka's face clouded over faintly.

He was a surprisingly sore loser at times. Knowing this, she lit a little flame under him.

"Come on now, you can do this, Tomioka. I'm rooting for you." Shinobu smiled brightly and pushed him forward. She kept pushing him into the center of the room, where Himejima was waiting. Uzui stood up and yielded his place to Tomioka. At the next table over, Rengoku flashed his bright white teeth.

"All right, Rengoku here will be the referee!" he declared. "Both of you, fight with your heads held high like true men!"

"Understood," said Himejima.

"Himejima!" Uzui called out nonchalantly. He didn't follow up with any further spoken message, but the meaning he packed into the name alone was "make it look good, but lose."

Himejima nodded, as if to say that he was on the same page. He set his rock of a hand on the table, and Tomioka gripped it with no expression on his face.

Then ...



“What on earth is going on?” Shinobu asked Uzui in as quiet a voice as she could manage.

The strategy, supposedly, was to let Tomioka win a fixed bout of arm wrestling to put him in a good mood. If they were lucky, that would get a smile out of him. But once the game started, not only had Tomioka been destroyed in seconds by Himejima, he’d even lost to Uzui, Rengoku, and Shinazugawa. Uzui was one thing, blessed with a good physique like he was, but Rengoku and Shinazugawa had builds similar to Tomioka’s. Although Tomioka barely beat Mitsuri, a girl, that wasn’t going to produce a smile or anything. When Shinobu glanced over at him, he was sitting on the floor cushion with a face like a Noh mask.

“You’re just winning against him like normal,” Shinobu rebuked Uzui, lowering her voice even further.

With an annoyed look on his face, he scratched a spot near his collarbone. “I mean, yeah, what d’you expect? After Himejima went and won like that, I mean, I couldn’t go losing on purpose.”

“And what’s going on with you, Himejima?” Shinobu pressed the Stone Hashira this time.

“Was that the point of the arm wrestling?” he whispered.

“Did ... Did you not understand that?” she responded, stunned.

“Namu.” He gently clasped his hands together in the air.

Why had he nodded so certainly when Uzui called out to him? Shinobu cradled her head in her hands in her mind. Uzui patted her hair with a hand as if he wasn’t a part of this at all.

“Kocho,” he said, “don’t be mad that you ended up going last.”

“I’m not angry about that.” She managed to keep from yelling the words. “I’m exasperated.”

“Thing is, ya got weak arms, you do. You really oughta train more? I mean, look at those limp-noodle arms.”

“Actual battle is not about arm strength.” Annoyed, Shinobu brushed Uzui’s hand away, a pained smile on her face.

Mitsuri came over, looking excited. “It’s okay, Shinobu. I’m up next.” Her voice was quiet, but she was clearly raring to go.

“Kanroji ...”

“So, like, I’m actually really good at making people laugh. Leave this one to me!” she said. Mitsuri thumped her chest with satisfaction, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling. So full of assurance ... She was a being of pure self-confidence. “I’ve made my brothers laugh a million times when they were peeving.”

“When they were ... peeving?” Shinobu furrowed her brow at the incomprehensible word.

Wait. Kanroji’s little brothers are ... A terrible feeling came over her as she tried to remember the ages of the boys Mitsuri had told her about before.

“To. Mi. O. Ka!”

The Love Hashira was already approaching Tomioka.

“Tickle tickle tickle tickle tickle tickle!” she said, as she began tickling his sides. “Give up? Give up yet? I’m gonna keep tickling you until you give up!”

Tomioka was silent.

“Tickle tickle tickle tickle tickle!”

Kanroji ...

Shinobu unconsciously looked off into the distance. It was true that people laughed when they were tickled. Children in particular loved to be tickled. If this had been Tanjiro or Inosuke, they might have laughed themselves senseless. Inosuke might have gotten angry and yelled, “Stop! Don’t go making Lord

Inosuke all warm and fluffy!” And Zenitsu would have squealed in ecstasy, “Aaaaah! I’m so happy!”

This was a full-grown man. And this was Tomioka.

“Oh ... I-I’m sorry.”

Just as Shinobu had feared, Tomioka did not crack the tiniest smile and seemed to pull back slightly—no, he was even afraid. Seeing this, Mitsuri came back to her senses and pulled away from him, her face bright red, as she curled into herself in despair.

“I’m ... really sorry ... I wish I could ... disappear ...” Her embarrassment was so acute, she was on the verge of tears.

Iguro stood up as if to protect her. “Tomioka. Do you not have a heart?” He glared at Tomioka, eyes harboring hatred. “I’ll never forgive you for trampling all over Kanroji’s honest efforts. Not now, not ever.”

His voice trembled with anger, and a number of blue veins popped up on his temples. Their mission to make Tomioka smile was completely gone from his head. He looked ready to draw his sword at any second.

Tomioka looked at Iguro with cool eyes.

Breaking the explosive tension, the fusuma door flew open with a *bang*.

“Never fear, Iguro, Kanroji! I’ll handle things from here!”

Shinobu wasn’t sure when he had slipped out of the room, but Kyojuro Rengoku was now standing in the open doorway. He charged into the room with high spirits, and the moment Shinobu saw a pair of unfamiliar glasses on top of his head, the world spun around her.

“Tomioka, have you seen my glasses? I’ve been looking for them all over, but I can’t find them anywhere!”



Tomioka stared at him in disbelief. “They’re on your head,” he muttered. “Did your brain get worse along with your eyes?”

Rengoku froze on the spot.

“Mm,” he groaned, then shouted, “It’s impossible! Not a person alive could make Tomioka smile!”

No, Rengoku. I’ve got my doubts about this gimmick too.

Shinobu resisted the urge to say this and instead asked, “Did you always wear glasses?”

“Nah! I can see perfectly, thirty years into the future. I went and got these just now!” he replied with a cheery smile. He wasn’t the least bit concerned that the joke he’d so carefully prepared had flopped. He never spoke in a quiet voice.

Five of them were still left to go—Iguro, Muichiro, Himejima, Shinazugawa, and Shinobu—but Iguro was currently the embodiment of anger. He was in no state to make Tomioka smile. In fact, he wanted to kill him. Muichiro hadn’t been on board from the start, and Shinazugawa was absolutely out of the question. Himejima himself had said that he wasn’t very good at making people laugh, so she couldn’t count on him.

For all intents and purposes, she was the only one left to carry out their mission. She stared at Tomioka’s unrelentingly expressionless face. *Make Tomioka smile ... Did he even know how?* She started to think rudely, and a cry slipped out of her.

“Oh!” Actually. If it was just about making him smile, even Shinazugawa could make it happen. She knew of exactly one card they could play.

Shinobu had actually seen Tomioka smile faintly, just once. At the time, he had been eating ... She looked around and walked over to Shinazugawa, who appeared ready to explode in irritation.

“Shinazugawa. Shinazugawa.”

“Yeah? What?” he snapped, glaring at her with bloodshot eyes.

“Salmon stewed with daikon,” Shinobu whispered into the ear of her extremely deranged colleague. “Tomioka’s favorite food is salmon stewed with

daikon.”

“Huh?”

“He’ll definitely smile if he has some.” She grinned.

Shinazugawa looked like he would rather skewer her. “Are you messing with me?”

“Of course not. I would never mess with you. It’s true. So please invite Tomioka out to get some salmon stewed with daikon.” Shinobu told him in a low voice, while in contrast, Shinazugawa roared, boiling over with rage.

“Whaaaaa?! Why should I do that?! Kocho, you could just ask him yourse—”

“It’s for Master Ubuyashiki.” Shinobu brought out her secret weapon, and Shinazugawa gulped back his next words. She kept going, as if to strike the killing blow.

“Please think about how happy Master Ubuyashiki would be if you could make Tomioka smile. ‘Thank you, Sanemi. You truly are amazing,’ he’d tell you with a grin. I just know it.”

“Ngh.” Shinazugawa’s eyes flew open wide. He was silent for a moment after that, but he eventually looked back at Tomioka.

Shinobu turned her gaze that way too.

Giyu Tomioka had the usual expression on his face that made it impossible to know where he was looking or what he was thinking. He probably didn’t intend it that way, but his face seemed like he was making fun of anyone who spoke to him.

As she’d feared, merely looking at Tomioka’s face made Shinazugawa’s hands shake. Blood vessels twitched on his forehead. But ...

“H-hey, T-Tomioka.” He still managed to call out to his colleague because it was the request of Ubuyashiki, who he adored like a father.

His shaking voice rose in anger, and despite the fact that he was so enraged, the corners of his mouth turned up in something like a faint smile. The effort brought tears to his eyes.

“H-how about we go get some salmon stewed with daikon?”

“No.” The response was immediate.

Tomioka. You, why would you ... ? Shinobu closed her eyes. She heard the sound of Shinazugawa’s blood vessels snapping from oddly nearby.

“I just had some salmon stewed with daikon,” Tomioka continued, but his voice was drowned out by the bestial, rage-filled roar of Sanemi Shinazugawa.



“So that really happened, huh?” Tanjiro said admiringly.

“Yes.” Tomioka nodded.

Tanjiro sighed. He never got to hear about the Hashira talking with each other. The story featured Kyojuro Rengoku when he was still alive. Picturing his energetic form, Tanjiro’s heart filled with warmth. *I’ll have to tell Senjuro about this in a letter.*

While he was thinking this, Tomioka murmured absently, “Even remembering it now, I have no idea why Shinazugawa was so angry.”

Tanjiro cocked his head to one side thoughtfully.

“I know!” He clapped his hands together. “I’m sure that Shinazugawa wanted to go eat salmon stewed with daikon with you, Giyu.”

“Shinazugawa ... With me?” Tomioka looked a little surprised.

“Yes!” Tanjiro bobbed his head up and down. “So maybe he was sad when you said no?”

“Uh-huh ...”

Tanjiro didn’t know what Tomioka thought of his suggestion.

“If we can be friends over ohagi, I’ll invite Shinazugawa out next time,” Tomioka said slowly. “I’ll ask him to go get some salmon stewed with daikon with me.”

“That’s a great idea! I just know you’ll end up being friends,” Tanjiro replied,

beaming. Tomioka also looked just a little bit happy. The faint smile that popped up on his surprisingly childish face in profile delighted Tanjiro.

The way Tomioka was now, Tanjiro was sure he'd be able to be friends with everyone. He hoped he would get to see Tomioka laughing with the other Hashira one day. He was fairly awkward and despairingly few of words, but he was honestly a really nice person. How happy he would be too if he could smile and laugh surrounded by friends.

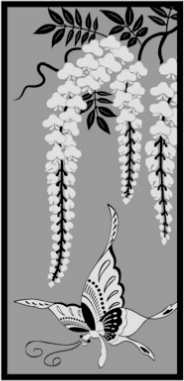
I wish I could show Rengoku that scene.

Actually, he'd want Rengoku to be laughing among them. Remembering the dead man's smile as bright as the sun, Tanjiro felt a sharp twinge in his nose.

"Tanjiro," an older trainee called. "We better get back to it."

"Okay!" Tanjiro sniffled and stood up.

At any rate, right now, he had to get stronger. He'd get stronger and never let anyone or anything be taken from him again. The brisk wind carried the crisp scent of bamboo as Tanjiro gripped the hilt of his wooden sword tightly with both hands.



Chapter 6
**JUNIOR HIGH AND
HIGH SCHOOL ★ TALES
OF KIMETSU ACADEMY!!:
PARADISE LOST**

“I’ve asked the school festival committee members for an urgent assembly today for a very specific reason,” Shinobu Kocho, the committee chair, announced in the meeting room after school. The look on her face was more mysterious than ever. “There is concern about the possibility of a large-scale group poisoning at the festival a month from now.”

“Taking the season into consideration, we’ve given thorough guidance on hygiene measures,” Treasurer Aoi Kanzaki noted, her face serious. “Booths selling raw food, which would be more likely to cause *food* poisoning, have been prohibited,”

Secretary Senjuro Rengoku cocked his head to one side as he wrote on the blackboard. Had Kocho said group food poisoning?

As if to respond to this doubt in his head, Shinobu corrected her treasurer. “I’m not talking about food poisoning, Aoi. Just poisoning. If the word ‘sound poisoning’ existed, then that might be more appropriate.”

“Sound ... poisoning?” Aoi had never heard of the idea before. She looked dubiously toward the vice chair, Kanao Tsuyuri, in the seat next to her.

Kanao shook her head, looking perplexed.

Senjuro, Aoi, and Kanao naturally all looked at Shinobu.

Seeing the question in their eyes, she sighed. “The issue is with this event.”

They looked at the flyer she pulled out and saw that it was for the Kimetsu Academy school festival’s most famous event, the Kimetsu Music Festival.

Because the grand prize was *exceedingly* grand, this event drew real excitement from the student body every year. The prize this year was credibly rumored to be a trip to Las Vegas, so the participating groups were really throwing everything they had into it.

“A band called Seedy Style Democracy is scheduled to perform.”

While Senjuro and Aoi nodded, the normally silent Kanao spoke up for once. “Oh. Tanjiro’s band.”

“Yes.” For some reason, Shinobu turned pitying eyes on Kanao. “The band is registered as having four members: Tanjiro, Zenitsu, Inosuke, and Mr. Uzui, the

art teacher.”

“Is there an issue with this band?” Aoi asked.

Shinobu paused at length and finally said, “Yes. Well ... I believe they’re practicing in the music room right now.” She had a thoughtful look on her face. “Seeing is believing, I suppose. Aoi, Senjuro, would you go and take a look? Be very careful.”

Senjuro thought it was weird that she asked just the two of them to go.

Aoi wondered the same thing, but the pair left the meeting room and headed off to the music room.



“This is where they’re practicing, hmm?” Senjuro remarked.

“I guess so.” Aoi nodded. “But the music room’s completely soundproof, so we can’t hear anything out here.”

“Why on earth did she tell us to be careful?”

“Maybe because they’re concentrating, so we should try not to disturb them?”

Whispering to each other, Aoi and Senjuro pulled the heavy door of the music room open.

It only took a moment.

What assaulted them was something not of this world ... an explosion of sound like a wall of hatred and hexes.



“I completely—hrrk—understand.”

“This really is a prob ... unnnh ...”

“I’m sorry you had to witness that, Aoi, Senjuro. I’m glad you’re both all

right.”

When Aoi and Senjuro returned to the meeting room covering their mouths, their faces drained of all color, Shinobu gently commended them for their efforts. The reason she hadn’t dared send Kanao was because she didn’t want to hurt her—not when she had fond feelings for Tanjiro.

“Kanao, I’m truly sorry, but we do need to report on the current situation,” Aoi said. “First of all, Tanjiro’s overwhelming tone-deaf vocals rub any listener’s nerves the wrong way, and Zenitsu’s hateful shamisen causes you to lose your sense of balance. On top of that, Inosuke’s arrhythmic drumming induces incessant nausea, and the roar of Mr. Uzuī’s harmonica, powered by his superhuman lung capacity, strikes the killing blow.”

“If they were playing out under the blue sky instead of in the music room, I believe we would see significant damage. I’m sorry, Vice Chair Tsuyuri.” Senjuro turned toward Kanao and bowed.

Kanao fidgeted, her face pale. That was only natural. Even if you actually heard it yourself, it was impossible to believe that this kind of music pollution could exist in this world.

“I think—I believe—they must be eliminated immediately.” Looking like she was still quite nauseous, Aoi approached Shinobu while holding a plastic bag.

“But that would mean turning our back on the philosophy of our school, ‘Respect every student’s individuality equally,’” Shinobu noted.

“We cannot trade lives for that,” Aoi declared firmly.

“Poor ... Tanjiro ...” Kanao’s shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“I’m really sorry, Kanao!” Aoi hurriedly said to her friend. “But that band is a lethal weapon.”

It was harsh, but Senjuro understood what she meant too well. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the band were designated a biological weapon in the future.

“Umm.” Senjuro raised his hand timidly. “How about we cancel the music festival itself?” That way, they wouldn’t have to tell Tanjiro and his band the

truth.

Senjuro was very fond of all three of the upperclassmen. And he liked Uzui as a teacher, although he did have that tendency to explode. If they could avoid it, he'd rather not hurt any of them.

Shinobu shook her head.

“One of the other groups is a brother-sister band made up of Gyutaro and Ume Shabana. They played last year as well, and Ume's so popular that boys from schools all over, not just ours, come in droves to see her. I hear that the traditional Japanese band led by Mr. Kyogai has gotten a lot of praise from critics overseas. But more than anything else, the girl band made up of Nezuko, Makomo, Kiyo, Naho, and Sumi is immensely popular with all the students. If we unilaterally cancel the event—”

“But if we don't do something, we'll see hundreds of casualties—urrrp,” Aoi interjected with a pale face. Perhaps picturing the sight, she covered her mouth with the plastic bag again.

Senjuro nodded silently.

Seeing her fellow committee members like this, Shinobu hesitated for a moment. She then spoke like she had made up her mind. “We have only one choice. We fight poison with poison.”



“What do you mean? Me and Gyutaro don't get the final slot?!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Little Miss Chair. Who even are these jerks with their seedy whatever baaaand?”

The “poison” Shinobu spoke of was the Shabana siblings, the most delinquent of the delinquents at the academy.

They were supposed to have the coveted final performance spot of the day, and Shinobu had just informed them that there'd been a lineup change due to various circumstances. Even as they closed in on her, glaring furiously, Shinobu was unperturbed.

“Mr. Uzui has formed a band with three students. Tanjiro is on vocals, Zenitsu is playing shamisen, Inosuke drums, and Mr. Uzui is on harmonica.”

“You can’t be serious!” Ume snarled. “What’s that group of uggos gonna do with a band?! Just a bunch of amateurs! Who wants to hear a garbage band like that?!”

Kanao looked clearly put out by this declaration.

“That Tanjiro’s especially annoying! Complaining when he’s that ugly! Acting like he’s all love and justice! I hate that guy!”

Kanao took a half step forward.

“Kanao,” Aoi said softly, and rubbed her friend’s back to pacify her.

Senjuro watched over the proceedings on tenterhooks. *What if something happens and I have to protect them because I’m the boy?*

“Uh? Isn’t Uzui that hot teacher who’s got those three hotties waiting on him hand and foot?” Gyutaro raised dubious eyebrows. “And now he wants to take our spot on the stage and our trip to Las Vegas? Not a chance. Not a chance in hell!”

“Right, Gyutaro?!” Ume agreed.

“Yeah. Any two-bit punk who tries to get in our way, I won’t stop raging until I’ve peeled the skin from their living bodies and spilled their guts on the ground!”

“P-please calm down, Shabana.”

“M-murder is not appropriate.”

Not only was the younger sister Ume all worked up, big brother Gyutaro was also getting in on the action.

While Senjuro and Aoi fidgeted nervously, Shinobu turned to the furious pair and smiled like a blooming flower. “In that case.”



“Why don’t the two of you go and discuss the matter with the members of Seedy Style Democracy directly?” Shinobu suggested.

Brother and sister ranted and grumbled and complained, and finally threw open the sliding door, knocking it right out of the wall, and stormed out of the room—most likely going straight for the music room.

“Gyutaro and Ume were quite angry. Do you think Tanjiro and the others will be all right?” Senjuro asked no one in particular as he set the door back on its tracks.

Kanao stood up, her chair clattering. “I’m going to go and take a look.”

“You don’t need to worry about them,” Shinobu told her, calm as ever.

“But—”

“Mr. Uzui’s with them. However he might look, he’s absurdly strong. Apparently, he was leader of the biggest gang in the area when he was at school here. He knocked out two hundred delinquents on his own or something like that. And then he went to an art university, refused all the enthusiastic offers he got from professionals in the field after he graduated, and came to work as a teacher here.”

“Is he really that strong?” Senjuro recalled the face of the art teacher, who had been his older brother’s close friend since they were at school together. If anything, he would have put it in the “gentleman” category.

“Yes.” Shinobu nodded. “Very much so.”

“In that case, if it does turn into a fight, won’t that actually be bad?” Aoi asked hesitantly.

True. If this turned into something larger and the incident were found out, it wouldn’t just affect Seedy Style Democracy. The Shabana siblings would also be banned from playing. If that happened, it might eventually interfere with the operation of the event. Shinobu narrowed her eyes slightly.

“If it were a fight between students, then they’re all guilty, and they all lose out. If a teacher unilaterally beats up students, the one facing immediate punishment would be Mr. Uzui alone. If Mr. Uzui is prohibited from playing,

then Tanjiro, Zenitsu, and Inosuke will inevitably also not be able to get up on stage. Collective responsibility.”

The rest of the committee stared at her in silence.

“Right? Perfect, all settled.” Shinobu clapped her hands. She was saying some fairly unpleasant things, and yet her face was as sweet as ever with her usual smile.

That smile made you think that this was one person you never wanted to make an enemy of, even if it meant your life.

The next morning ...

The festival committee received the shocking news that the Shabana siblings had been found collapsed in front of the music room after school and taken to the hospital.



“Apparently, they were both vomiting, shaking, and complaining of headaches,” Kanao reported.

“To be honest, we underestimated the destructive power of their performance.” Shinobu sighed, and now, at last, her face clouded over. “We don’t have a second to spare.”

Meeting after school once more, it was basically the same group in the academy meeting room as the day before. However ...

“Umm.” Senjuro raised a nervous hand. “Why is my brother—I mean, Mr. Rengoku here?” For some reason, the history teacher Kyojuro Rengoku had joined their number.

Incidentally, the teacher sitting on the festival committee was someone else.

“Mm. Kanao asked me!” Kyojuro replied cheerily. “She said she has a favor that only I can do! What am I helping with?”

“The truth is, there’s this band Seedy Style Democracy ...” Shinobu briefly explained the events so far.

Kyojuro nodded as he listened. “I see. You want me to go and tell them to stop this unpleasant and physically harmful performance? To save the academy?”

Kyojuro ...

Senjuro felt dizzy at the way his brother did not mince words. He wasn't being malicious. Not in the slightest. He just was completely, utterly, innocently tactless.

“You're the only one we can turn to, Mr. Rengoku. Please persuade them somehow.” Shinobu bowed neatly.

“Don't you worry about it! It's a teacher's duty to keep the peace of the academy!”

“Um, Mr. Rengoku. Could you please do it so you don't hurt their feelings?” Senjuro said, half in prayer, as he looked up at his enthusiastic older brother.

Kyojuro responded with a brilliant smile. “You got it! Students are like my own children! There's no way I would hurt them. You just leave this one to me!!”

Two hours later ...

“Hey gang! I'm back!” Kyojuro trotted into the room.

All eyes were on him at once.

He nodded with satisfaction. “The ramen was delicious!”

“Kyojurooooo?!”

“They bought you off?!”

Senjuro and Aoi cried out automatically.

Without a care in his heart, Kyojuro smiled and shook his head. “They didn't buy me off. I got there when they were just taking a break, so we ended up going for ramen. They asked me, and I just went with them!”

That's being bought off, Kyojuro. Senjuro sighed in his heart.

“I spoke with Kamado and the boys while we shared ramen from the same pot.” Kyojuro stopped briefly and smiled admiringly. “Their eyes actually shone! They want to make their major label debut someday and reach out to the

world!”

“Hrrk!”

“Urrp!”

Having experienced firsthand the fearsomeness of Seedy Style Democracy, Aoi and Senjuro both heaved unconsciously. Kanao quietly rubbed each of their backs in turn.

“They can’t possibly have such grand aspirations.” Even Shinobu paled at this, and she wrapped her arms around herself like she’d felt a sudden chill.

“Did you manage to get them to give up on performing?” Senjuro could basically picture the answer, but he asked his brother anyway. As he feared ...

“After seeing students so serious about something, all I can do is cheer them on!” Kyojuro declared.

Silence greeted these words.

“I can’t stop that passion!!” he cried emphatically. “I would have to commit ritual suicide right here and now!”

Basically, he’d been moved by his students’ passion. *Phew ... At least he wasn’t bribed by a bowl of ramen.* Senjuro let out a secret sigh of relief. As a little brother who loved and respected his older brother, this was a reason he could accept.

Still, the situation remained unresolved. With Kyojuro Rengoku’s attempt at persuasion ending in failure hot on the heels of the Shabana siblings, the members of the committee were increasingly at a loss.



Although they continued to fight fiercely to try and somehow stop the band from playing, none of their efforts bore any fruit until they were down to just one week before the school festival.

“What about making it so that only they can’t use the mics and sound system —”

“Even unamplified, they have a fairly lethal potential.”

“We could have a more potent curative to neutralize ...”

“Why don’t we let dogs and cats run free in the venue?”

“Those dogs and cats would die. Probably.”

“What if we lie to them about the starting time? Say it’s like two in the morning or something.”

“I feel like they’d actually catch on to that.”

“And we’d be flooded with complaints from the neighborhood ...”

At wits’ end, the members of the group were discussing various possibilities when, without a knock or greeting, the door flew open.

“Time to go home.”

They all turned to look in that direction.

Standing there was the gym teacher, Giyu Tomioka, wooden sword in hand. The whistle he used to instruct students shone brightly on his chest against the fabric of his favorite tracksuit. He was also a friend of Senjuro’s older brother from their school days.

“What are you doing here so late?” he demanded.

“If it’s about the meeting request form, we did—” Shinobu started and then stopped herself with a gasp.

Followed by Senjuro.

Most likely, Aoi and Kanao had also had the same thought.

This was the head of the disciplinary committee, Giyu Tomioka. Known for instructing his students so strictly that the PTA had their sights set on him, he was also referred to as Kimetsu Academy’s lethal weapon. If anyone could stop Seedy Style Democracy, it would be him.

“Mr. Tomioka,” Shinobu said quietly.

“What, Kocho?”

“There’s been a violation of school rules.”

The gym teacher's eyes glittered at Shinobu's words. Normally, his eyes were reminiscent of a dead fish, but the instant he discovered a student in violation of the school rules, they sparked to life like a beast catching sight of its prey.

"Behavior that causes significant trouble for others is not permitted on school grounds. Physical or mental injury to others is not permitted," she recited. "There are students and a teacher who have violated these rules."

"Who?" he demanded.

"Mr. Uzui, Tanjiro Kamado, Zenitsu Agatsuma, and Inosuke Hashibira." She also informed him that they were currently using the music room.

That was enough to sort the whole situation out. Or at least, it should have been.



An hour later, Tomioka made his silent return.

"Mr. Tomioka, you're ba—" The reason Aoi stopped abruptly was because she had noticed the fat tears sliding down Tomioka's cheeks.

Tears from the gym teacher, who was feared by students as having a heart of stone, made Senjuro, Kanao, and Aoi freeze on the spot, and even Shinobu looked surprised.

"What's the matter, Mr. Tomioka?" she asked gently.

"... moving."

"Did you have a fight with Mr. Uzui?" she pushed quietly. "Is that why you're crying?"

"It was so moving."

"Pardon?"

This was entirely unexpected. Shinobu and the others furrowed their brows.



“It was so moving.”

“Um, excuse me. I couldn’t quite hear that. What did you say?” Shinobu lowered her eyebrows and queried softly.

“I’ve never heard such powerfully emotional lyrics in my entire life,” Tomioka said. He closed his eyes as if trying to grab hold of the lingering memory of the song and began to cry hot tears once more.



“Why do you have a girlfriend and I dooon’t? What’s wrong with meeeee? Past life? What crime did I commiiiiiiit?”

On the stage inside the gymnasium, which was closed off more than strictly necessary as a countermeasure against noise complaints from the neighborhood, the murder-weapon-level performance by Seedy Style Democracy was unfolding at that very moment.

“Senjuro! Get the stretcher! Hurry!”

“Okay!”

“The first-aid tent is full.”

“We’ll use the gym storage room. Push everything inside to the back.”

With earplugs firmly in place, the members of the festival committee devoted themselves to rescue operations while students dropped one after the other, as if sneering at their efforts.

Groans rose up all around them. And then the screams.

The music festival had turned into a living hell.

“I’m totally cool being kicked by hooves and sent flyiiiiing! Because I’m stuuuuupiiiiid!”

“We need more water!”

“The washroom! Go!”

“Kocho, this person’s eyes are rolling back in their head! They’re raving!”

“I’m coming!”

“Could you turn the air conditioning down a bit?”

The strained voices of Senjuro, Aoi, Kanao, and Shinobu were drowned out by the explosive sound. In the midst of all of this, Tomioka alone wept tears of deep emotion.

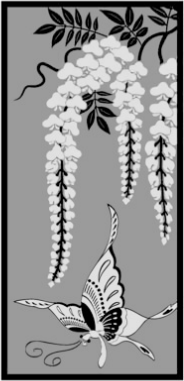
“Don’t be so cold. We’ll be together with a shot in the gut from this guuuun! Stop with the creepy and the impossible. Don’t say you’re stabbing me with a kniiiiife! I can guess! I can read a roooooom!”

“I can read a room ...”

What must Tomioka have looked like to his students as they dropped like flies, standing there in the center of the bloodshed, crying hot tears and singing along to the band?

After that, Giyu Tomioka’s students feared him even more, and the destructive Seedy Style Democracy became an even greater source of terror, but that is a story for another time.

What on earth about those lyrics spoke to his heart like that? How they conquered his steel tear ducts remains a mystery to this day.



It feels really
weird if
someone bites
your head,
so everyone
makes this
face.



Afterword
KOYOHARU GOTOUGE

How did you like the stories? I hope you had fun with them. I drew the illustrations, of course. But I had other work to take care of at the same time, and my artist brain got a little buggy. There were some issues like when I accidentally drew Rengoku in the Kimetsu Academy uniform in the scene where he's talk-ing about the glasses. The good folks in the novels editorial department were quick to notice, and I was able to fix the drawings. They also brought me some delicious tea after that, so I experienced the unusual phenomenon of the person who messed up coming out on top somehow. Again, I felt keenly that this book can only be made through the combined efforts of a great number of people. Thank you so much, everyone. Let's all take good care of our teeth.

Afterword
AYA YAJIMA

Thank you so much for giving me this chance to write the second of the *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* novelizations. This is once again because of the support of all you readers and everyone involved in the production of these books. I've thrown my whole heart into the writing to ensure that I don't do any damage to the world of my beloved *Demon Slayer*.

I have to say a huge thank you, Koyoharu Gotouge, for overseeing this novelization during an incredibly busy period while juggling a weekly series, the anime, a fanbook, and a short story collection. Each time you sent me notes and advice—like how Uzui doesn't call Inosuke "Inosuke" or how he speaks more politely with Himejima—I would weep fat tears in front of my computer, overwhelmed with the deepest gratitude and respect.

I was so overcome with joy that I fell prostrate before my computer. Thank you for again drawing the most magnificent illustrations for this book! They're super cute! They're perfect! They really are the best!!

My editor Nakamoto was an enormous help again. Whenever I came up against a wall, Nakamoto would sit and wrestle with ideas with me, and I can't tell you how very heartening this was.

I want to send my most sincere and heartfelt gratitude to everyone in the novels editorial department, always so supportive of me and my work; *Shonen Jump* editor Asai; Shiotani from Naht who did all the proofreading again for this volume; Sato; the many other people who helped make this book happen; and

those of you who picked it up off the shelf!